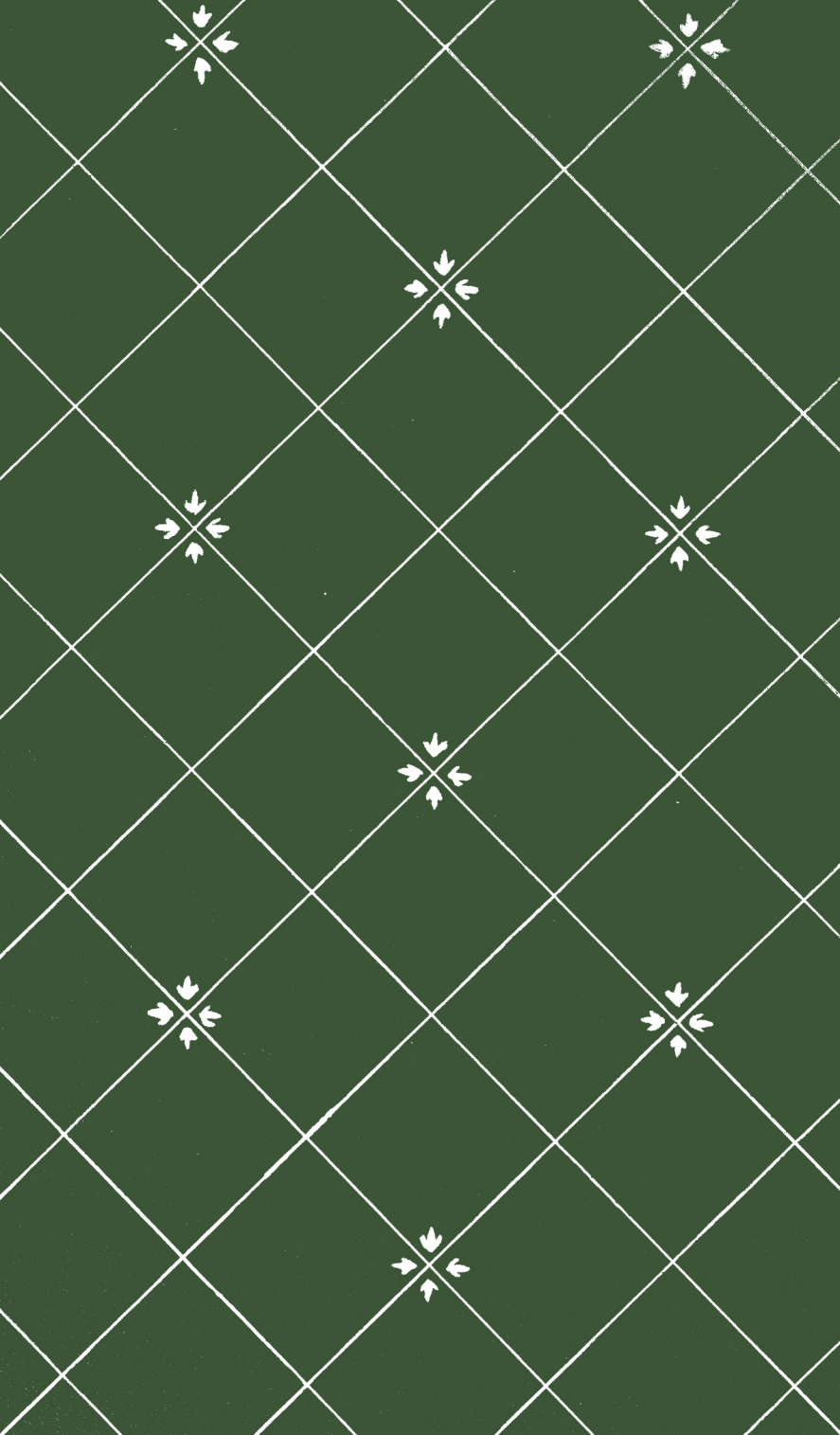
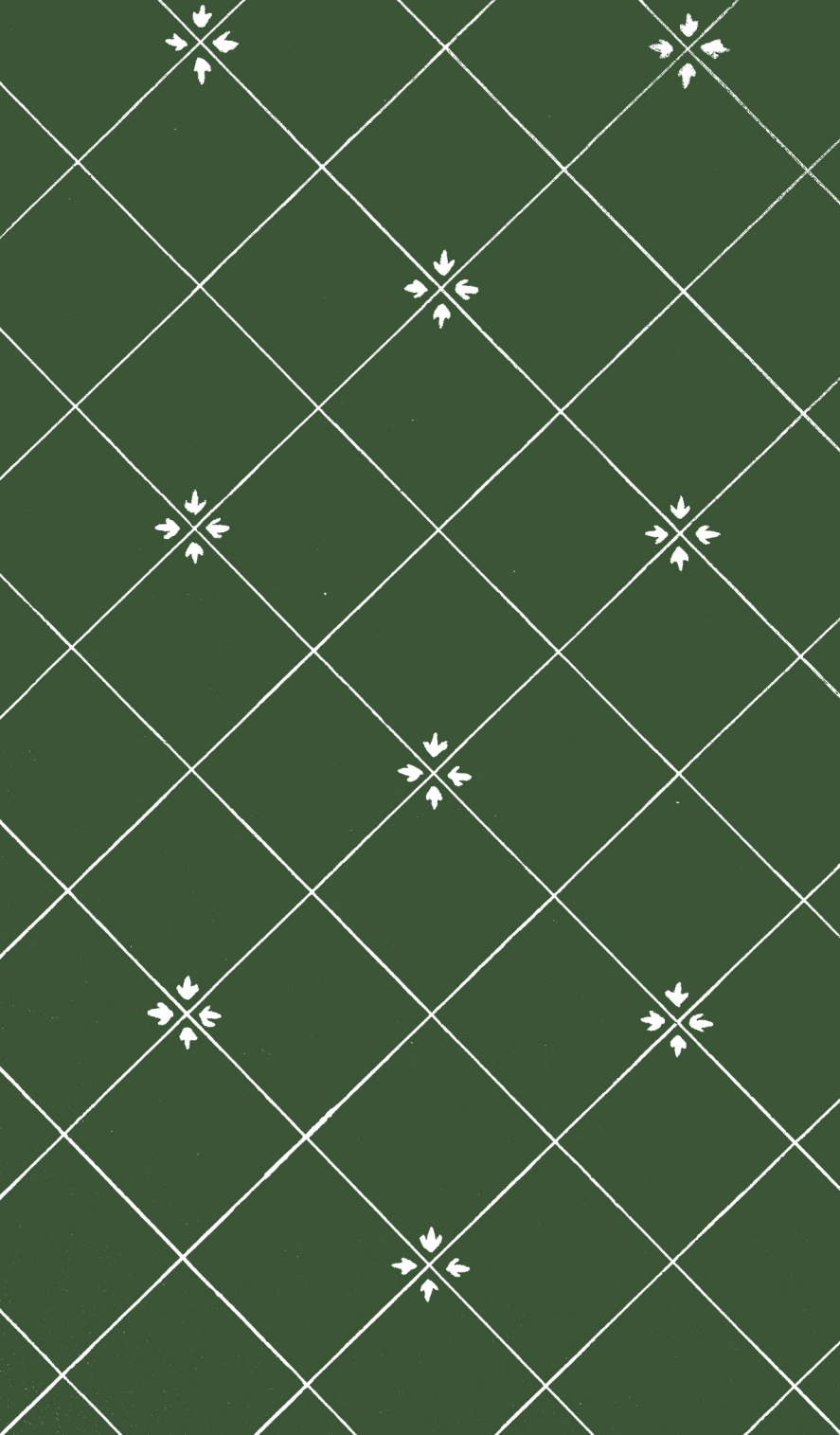


# LOVE'S BITTERSWEET MELODY



Stories





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# LOVE'S BITTERSWEET MELODY

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*Stories*

Designed by *Robert Saifulin*



Raduga Publishers  
Moscow

Translation from the Russian

**РАДОСТИ И ГОРЕСТИ ЛЮБВИ**

**Повести и рассказы**

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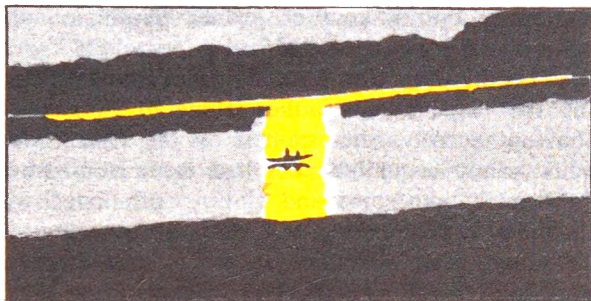
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# Juan Turgenev

ASYA



## I

☺ was twenty-five years old then, began N. N., so you see all this is ancient history. I had only just escaped from tutelage and was going abroad, not to “complete my education”, as they used to say in those days, but simply because I wanted to have a look at the wide world. I was healthy, young, high-spirited; I had plenty of money and had as yet acquired no responsibilities — and I lived for the moment, did what I liked, in a word, it was the springtime of my life. It never even occurred to me then that man is not a plant and that his springtime is but a brief one. The young eat gilded honey-cakes, thinking that’s what was meant by daily bread; but the time will come when they will be glad of a crust. There is no point in dwelling on this, though.

I travelled with neither aim nor plan, stopping wherever I liked and resuming my journey as soon as I felt a desire for new faces — and I mean faces. It was only people that interested me; I detested monuments, magnificent collections, and the very sight of a cicerone was depressing and hateful to me; I was bored to death in the Dresden Grüne Gewölbe. Nature affected me intensely, but I did not care for the so-called natural beauties, for impressive peaks, cliffs, or waterfalls; I did not like to have Nature forced on my notice, I would not brook her interference. But faces, living human faces, human speech, the movements and laughter of human beings — these were things I could not do without. I was always most happy and at my ease in a crowd — I liked going where others went, shouting when others shouted, and at the same time was fond of



observing how these others shouted. My chief amusement was to observe human beings ... and I did not merely observe them, I examined them with a kind of joyous, insatiable curiosity. But again I am straying from my narrative.

Well then, twenty years ago, I was living in the small German town of Z., on the left bank of the Rhine. I was in search of solitude, having recently been smitten by the charms of a certain young widow whose acquaintance I had made at a watering-place. She was extremely handsome and clever, and flirted with all and sundry, including my unworthy self, first encouraging me, only to wound me cruelly and abandon me for a rosy-cheeked Bavarian lieutenant. It must be admitted that the wound to my heart was not so very deep, but I considered myself bound to indulge in melancholy and solitude for a certain time — the young do indulge in such moods — and took up my residence in the town of Z.

This little town took my fancy because of its situation at the foot of two high hills, its crumbling walls and towers, old lime-trees and the high bridge over the sparkling river, a tributary of the Rhine, and, most of all, by its good wine. The prettiest blonde German damsels walked up and down the narrow streets every evening as soon as the sun had set (it was June), greeting the foreigner with a pleasantly uttered "*Guten Abend!*"; some of them did not even go in when the moon rose behind the steep roofs of the ancient houses and the small cobble-stones in the road lay clearly outlined in its still beams. It was then that I liked best to roam the streets of the little town. The moon seemed to be gazing steadily down at it from the pure sky, and the town felt this gaze and lay there serene and responsive, flooded by the moonlight, that tranquil light which is nevertheless so subtly disturbing. The weathercock on top of the high Gothic steeple shone a pale gold, and the same gold shimmered on the black gleaming surface of the river. Slender candles (the Germans are a thrifty nation!) flickered modestly in the narrow windows beneath slate roofs. Vines thrust out curling tendrils mysteriously from behind stone walls; something flitted by in the shadow of the ancient well in the middle of the triangular town square, the drowsy whistle of the night watchman suddenly broke the silence, an amiable dog growled softly, and the air was so caressing to one's face, the lime-trees were so fragrant, that one breathed ever deeper and deeper, and the word *Gretchen* rose to one's lips either as between an exclamation or a question.

The town of Z. lies about a mile away from the bank of

the Rhine. I often went to gaze upon the mighty river and sat for hours at a time on a stone bench beneath a huge, solitary ash-tree, forcing myself to brood over the fickle widow. A little statue of the Madonna, with a child-like face and a crimson heart stabbed through and through with swords on the exposed breast, peered sadly out from among the foliage. On the opposite bank lay the town of L., which was a little larger than that in which I had taken up my residence. One evening I was sitting on my favourite bench, gazing in turns at the river, the sky and the vineyards. Flaxen-headed urchins were scrambling over the side of a boat, hauled on to the bank with its tar-smeared bottom uppermost. Ships glided slowly downstream with slack sails; the greenish waves slipped by with faintly gurgling ripples. Suddenly I caught the sound of music; I listened more attentively. A waltz was being played in the town of L.; the double-bass boomed spasmodically, the violin poured out an indistinct melody, the flute whistled cheerfully.

"What's that?" I asked of an old man in a velveteen waistcoat, blue stockings and buckled shoes, who was just then approaching me.

"That?" he repeated, shifting the stem of his pipe from one corner of his mouth to the other. "It's the students from B. who have come here to hold their *Kommers*."

"I should like to have a look at this *Kommers*," I said to myself. "And I've never been in L., either." I sought out the ferryman and crossed to the opposite bank.

## II

It may be that there are some who do not know what a *Kommers* is. It is a kind of solemn feast attended by all the students from the same district or fraternity (*Landsmannschaft*). Almost all the participants in a *Kommers* wear the time-honoured costume of German students — short military tunics, high boots, and tiny caps with bands of the prescribed colour. The students usually assemble for dinner at which a senior presides, and feast till morning, drinking, singing their songs — *Landesvater*, *Gaudeamus* — smoking, reviling the philistines. Sometimes they hire a band.

A *Kommers* of precisely this description was being held in the town of L., in a garden opening on to the street in front of the modest Sun Inn. Garden and inn were decked with flags; the students sat at tables beneath the clipped lime-trees; a huge bulldog reposed under one

of the tables; the musicians sat a little apart, in an ivy arbour, scraping away valiantly, and occasionally refreshing themselves with draughts of beer. There were a number of people in the street, gathered in front of the low railings of the garden: the good people of L. were determined not to miss the opportunity of gazing at the visitors. I joined the crowd of onlookers. It amused me to watch the faces of the students; their embraces, exclamations, the innocent affectations of youth, the fiery glances, causeless laughter — the best kind of laughter in the world — all this joyous surge of fresh, youthful life, this impulse to advance — anywhere so long as it was forward — this good-natured abandon touched and inspired me. I almost felt inclined to join them myself...

"Haven't you seen enough, Asya?" said a masculine voice just behind me, speaking Russian.

"Let's wait a little longer," replied a feminine voice in the same language.

I turned swiftly... My glance fell on a good-looking young man wearing a peaked cap and a loose jacket; he was holding the arm of a girl, not very tall, with a straw hat shading the whole upper part of her face.

The words: "Are you Russians?" slipped involuntarily from my lips.

The young man smiled and said: "Yes."

"I never expected ... in such a remote place..." I began.

"Nor did we!" he broke in. "But so much the better! Let me introduce myself — my name's Gagin, and this is my..." he stumbled in his speech for a moment, "my sister. And what is your name, may I ask?"

I named myself and we got into conversation. I learned that Gagin, who, like myself, was travelling for pleasure, had drifted to the town of L. about a week before, and there he had stayed. Truth to say, I was not very anxious to make friends with Russians abroad. I could tell them from afar by their gait, the cut of their clothes, and especially by the expression of their faces. Usually complacent and contemptuous, frequently domineering, this expression would suddenly change to one of caution and anxiety; the stranger would all at once be on the alert, his gaze shifting uneasily. "Oh dear, I hope I haven't done anything foolish! They aren't laughing at me, are they?" his flurried glance seemed to say. A moment passed, and once more the majesty of countenance would be restored, with occasional lapses into blank astonishment.

Yes, I avoided Russians, but I took an immediate liking to Gagin. There are faces which everyone likes looking at, faces which seem to warm and soothe, and Gagin's was one of these — pleasing, kindly, with large, mild eyes, and framed in soft, silky curls. And when he spoke, even if you did not see his face, you felt, from the sound of his voice alone, that he was smiling.

The girl he called his sister at once struck me as exceedingly pretty. There was something interesting and unusual in her round, olive-skinned face, with the small, fine nose, almost childish cheeks, and luminous black eyes. She was gracefully built but did not seem to have grown to maturity yet. She was not in the least like her brother.

"Will you come home with us?" Gagin suggested. "I think we've been looking at Germans long enough. Our students would certainly have begun breaking the glasses and chairs by now, these are awfully tame. What do you say to going home, Asya?"

The girl nodded assent.

"We live outside town," continued Gagin, "in a lonely house, in the middle of a vineyard, very high up. It's a nice place, you'll love it! Our landlady promised to have some sour milk ready for us. It will be dark soon, and you'd better wait for the moon to rise before crossing the Rhine again."

We set off. Passing through the narrow gates of the town (it was surrounded by an ancient stone wall on which battlements were still intact in places), we emerged in open country, keeping close to the wall for about a hundred yards till we came to a tiny wicket-gate. Gagin opened it and led us up a steep path between vines planted in terraces; the sun was just beginning to set, but a liquid crimson light lay on the green vines, the tall stems, the dry soil on which big and small flagstones were scattered, the whitewashed walls crisscrossed with black beams and four windows of a small house on the top of the slope.

"This is our abode!" exclaimed Gagin as we approached. "And there's our landlady bringing us the milk. *Guten Abend, Madame!*.. We'll have something to eat in a minute, but first," he added, "look behind you — how do you like our view?"

The view was indeed beautiful. The Rhine lay far beneath us, silvery between its green banks; in one place it glowed with the crimson and gold of the sunset. The little town, nestling on the bank, showed all its houses and streets; the hills and fields around it extended far into the distance. It was lovely below, but above it

was still more beautiful. The purity and depth of the sky, the radiant transparency of the atmosphere made a deep impression on me. The air was cool and light and vibrant as if it, too, felt freer at that height.

"You've chosen a wonderful place to live in," I said.

"Asya found it," replied Gagin. "Come, Asya," he continued, "give your orders. Have everything served out of doors. We'll have supper here. You can hear the music better. Have you noticed," he continued, turning to me, "how a waltz that is simply abominable close by, a mere jumble of coarse, vulgar sounds, is suddenly transformed and stirs all your romantic chords when you hear it from a distance?"

Asya (her name was really Anna, but Gagin called her Asya, and with your permission, I will do the same) went into the house and was soon back again with the landlady. They carried between them a big tray, on which were a jug of milk, plates, spoons, sugar, berries, and bread. We sat down and began to eat. Asya took off her hat; her black hair, which she wore rather short and brushed smoothly over her head, like a young man's, fell in heavy locks round her neck and ears. At first she was shy with me, but Gagin chided her for this.

"Stop sulking, Asya! He won't bite you!"

She smiled and before long began speaking to me of her own accord. I have never seen a more restless creature. She did not sit still for a single moment; she was always jumping up, running into the house and back, humming, laughing frequently and strangely, as if she were laughing not at anything she heard, but at all sorts of thoughts which came into her head. Her great eyes looked straight ahead, brightly and fearlessly, but every now and then the lids contracted, and her glance became surprisingly deep and tender.

We chatted for nearly two hours. The day had long expired, and evening, first flaming and gradually subsiding to a serene crimson glow, in its turn growing pale and faint, melted, shimmering, into night, but our talk went on and on, as tranquil and peaceful as the air around us. Gagin ordered a bottle of Rhine wine which we drank at our leisure. The music still reached us, but its sounds now seemed sweeter and softer; lights came out in the town and over the river. Asya, her head drooping, her hair falling over her eyes, grew suddenly silent and sighed. She then told us she was going to bed, and went into the house; but I saw her standing for a long



time without lighting her candle at the closed window. At last the moon rose, its beams playing over the Rhine; everything looked different, some objects were lit up, others were plunged in darkness, even the wine in our cutglass tumblers gleamed mysteriously. The wind dropped, as if folding its wings, and died down; a fragrant nocturnal warmth rose from the ground.

"Time to go home!" I cried, "or I may not find anyone to ferry me across."

"Time to go home," echoed Gagin.

We went downhill by the path. Suddenly the stones rolled down behind us — Asya was running after us.

"I thought you were asleep," said her brother, but she ran past us without a word. The last dim torches lit by the students in the inn garden illuminated the foliage from below, giving the trees a festive and fantastic aspect. We found Asya on the bank of the river, talking to the ferryman. I leaped into the boat and bade my new friends farewell. Gagin promised to come and see me the next day. I pressed his hand and held out my hand to Asya, but she merely looked at me and shook her head. The boat put out and cut across the rapid stream. The ferryman, a hale old fellow, plunged the oars into the dark water with an effort.

"You've crashed into the moonlight pillar, you've broken it!" Asya shouted after me.

I looked down — the water was heaving round the sides of the boat in dark waves.

"Good-bye!" rang out her voice once more.

"Till tomorrow," called out Gagin.

The boat touched shore. I got out and looked back. There was no longer anyone to be seen on the opposite bank. The shaft of moonlight again stretched right across the river like a bridge of gold. The sounds of the old-fashioned Lanner waltz came to my ears as if bidding me farewell. Gagin was right, all the chords in my soul quivered in response to those insinuating strains. I walked home over the dark fields, slowly inhaling the fragrant air, and arrived at my room quite languid from the sweet exhaustion of vague, endless anticipation. I felt happy... But what was it that had made me happy? I desired nothing, I thought of nothing... I was happy.

I dived into my bed all but laughing from an excess of light, pleasing sensations, and was just about to close my eyes when it suddenly struck me that I had not once remembered my cruel

beauty the whole evening... "What does that mean?" I asked myself. "Am I not in love?" But with this I must have fallen asleep immediately, like a babe in its cradle.

### III

The next morning (I was already awake, but was still in bed) I heard the sound of a stick rattling against the window-pane, and a voice, which I immediately recognised as Gagin's, singing:

*And if thou sleep'st, I'll wake thee  
To the strains of my guitar...*

I hastened to open the door to him.

"Good morning," he said, coming in. "I've disturbed you early, but just look what a morning it is! The air's so fresh, dew everywhere, larks singing..."

With his curly, glossy hair, bare neck and pink cheeks he was as fresh as the morning himself.

I dressed; we went into the garden and sat on a bench, where we ordered coffee and began talking. Gagin informed me of his plans for the future. Having an adequate income and being quite independent, he planned to devote himself to art, and his only regret was that he had been so long making up his mind and had wasted so much time. I confided my own plans in him, initiating him, among other things, into the secret of my unhappy love. He heard me out indulgently, but as far as I could see my passion did not arouse much sympathy in him. Adding a few sighs to mine, out of politeness, he invited me to go home with him and look at his sketches. I readily consented.

We did not find Asya at home. She had gone, the landlady said, to "the ruins". A few miles beyond the town of L. were the ruins of a feudal castle. Gagin opened all his portfolios for me. There was a great deal of life and sincerity in his sketches, a certain freedom and breadth, but not one was finished, and I thought the drawing careless and feeble. I told him quite frankly what I thought.

"Yes, yes!" he exclaimed, sighing. "You are right. It's all very poor and immature, but what can I do? I've never really studied, and then there is the accursed Slav laxness. While you're pondering what you will do, you soar like an eagle, you feel capable

of moving mountains — but when it comes to execution, you soon grow weak and weary.”

I was about to make some encouraging remarks, but he silenced me with a wave of his hand and, gathering all the portfolios into a heap, dumped them on to the sofa.

“If I have patience enough, something will come of me,” he said through his teeth. “If not, I shall remain a dunce. Let’s go and look for Asyal”

We went out of the house.

#### IV

The path to the ruins wound along the slope of a narrow wooded valley; the bottom of this valley formed the bed of a rapid stream, making its noisy way over the stones as if in a hurry to merge with the great river that was gleaming tranquilly in the rift between the dark ridges of a mountain range. Gagin drew my attention to places which the light made especially beautiful, and his words showed that, though he might not be a painter, he had the soul of an artist. The ruins soon came in sight. On the crest of a naked rock rose a square turret, all black, still sturdy, but split in two by a diagonal crack. Moss-grown walls extended on either side of it, and here and there ivy clung to its stones; crooked trees drooped from the hoary battlements and crumbling arches. A stony path led to the surviving gates. Just as we approached them, the figure of a woman flashed by, ran swiftly over a heap of rubble and squatted on the ledge of a wall, on the very edge of an abyss.

“Why, it’s Asyal!” exclaimed Gagin. “What a crazy girl!”

We passed through the gateway and found ourselves in a small courtyard overgrown with crab-apple trees and nettles. It was indeed Asya on the ledge. Turning her face in our direction she laughed, but did not move from her perch. Gagin shook his finger at her, and I reproached her loudly for her recklessness.

“Leave her alone!” whispered Gagin to me. “Don’t tease her. You don’t know her. She’d think nothing of climbing the tower. Better observe and admire the common sense of the people here.”

I looked round. In a corner, sheltered in a tiny wooden booth, an old woman sat knitting a stocking and peering at us through her spectacles. She sold beer, ginger-bread and seltzer water to tourists. We sat down on a bench and drank the cool beer out of

heavy pewter mugs. Asya sat motionless on her ledge, her legs tucked under her, a gauze scarf bound round her head; her graceful figure was charmingly silhouetted against the clear sky, but I looked at her with a feeling of distaste. Already the day before I had noticed something tense, something not quite natural in her... "She wants to make an impression on us," I thought. "Why does she do it? What a childish trick!" As if guessing my thoughts, she suddenly cast a rapid searching look at me, again laughed, bounded from the wall in two jumps, and went up to the old woman, whom she asked to give her a glass of water.

"Do you think it's because I'm thirsty?" she said, addressing her brother. "No — there are some flowers growing on the wall which simply must be watered."

Gagin paid no attention to what she said. Holding the glass in her hand, she began climbing over the ruins, stopping here and there, bending over with an absurd air of importance as she poured out a drop or two of water, which shone brilliantly in the sun. Her movements were charming, but I still felt annoyed with her, though I could not help admiring her lightness and agility. At one extremely dangerous place she gave an affected gasp, and then burst out laughing... I was still more annoyed.

"She climbs like a goat!" muttered the old woman, looking up from her knitting for a moment.

At last Asya, having poured out all the water, came down to us, swaying playfully. Her brows, nostrils and lips twitched with a kind of strange mockery, her dark eyes were narrowed half defiantly, half merrily.

"I know you consider my conduct improper," her face seemed to say, "but I don't care. You're admiring me really."

"Well done, Asya, well done!" said Gagin in an undertone.

She seemed suddenly ashamed and, lowering her long eyelashes, sat down meekly beside us as if she felt guilty. For the first time I had a good look at her face, the most changeable face I had ever seen. A few minutes later it turned quite pale and assumed an absorbed, almost sorrowful expression; the very features seemed to me to have grown larger, more austere and plain. She became completely subdued. We went all round the ruins (Asya following at our heels), admiring the view. The dinner-hour was approaching. Gagin paid the old woman, took another mug of beer and, turning to me, exclaimed with a knowing look:

"To the health of the lady of your heart!"

"Has he — have you really such a lady?" asked Asya abruptly. "Who hasn't?" parried Gagin.

Asya thought for a moment; her face changed again, and once more her expression became one of defiant, almost insolent mockery.

On the way back she laughed and gambolled with still greater abandon. She broke off a long branch, laid it across her shoulder like a gun, and tied the scarf round her head. I remember we encountered a large English family, fair-haired and stuffy. Each of its members, as if at a command, turned glassy stares of icy astonishment upon Asya, and she, as if to spite them, broke into a song. As soon as we got home, she went to her room, and only reappeared when dinner was served, dressed in her best frock, her hair neatly brushed, tightly laced, and wearing gloves on her hands. She bore herself soberly, almost primly at table, scarcely touching the food and sipping water from a wine-glass. She obviously wished to appear before me in a new role — that of a well-behaved, well-bred young lady. Gagin let her alone; I could see that he was used to letting her have her way in everything. He only cast an occasional good-humoured glance at me, slightly raising one shoulder, as if to say: "She's a child — be indulgent!" The moment the meal was over, Asya rose, dropped a little curtsey and, putting on her hat, asked Gagin if she might go and see Frau Louise.

"Since when have you begun asking my permission?" he replied with his invariable smile, which seemed this time to have a shade of embarrassment in it. "Are you so bored in our company?"

"Not at all, but I promised Frau Louise yesterday that I would go and see her; besides, I thought you'd be happier by yourselves. Mr. N. (she pointed to me) can tell you more about himself."

She left us.

"Frau Louise," began Gagin, avoiding my glance, "is the widow of a former burgomaster, a worthy but empty-headed old lady. She has taken a great fancy to Asya. Asya has a passion for getting to know people in lower walks of life; I have observed that this sort of thing always springs from pride. She's certainly a bit spoilt, as you will have noticed," he added after a moment's silence. "But what's to be done about it? I have never been able to be strict with anyone — still less with her; I *have* to be indulgent to her."

I said nothing, and Gagin changed the subject. The more I saw of him, the more I liked him. I soon summed him up. His was a true Russian nature, frank, honest, single-minded, but regrettably languid



and lacking in tenacity and fire. Youth did not bubble up in him, it merely shed a quiet light. He had charm and intelligence, but I could not imagine what he would be like when he came to full maturity. Would he be an artist? To be an artist requires incessant, grinding toil ... and toil, thought I, looking at his indeterminate features, listening to his slow speech, is just what you will not do, you will never be able to drive yourself. But it was impossible not to like him, one's whole heart went out to him. We spent something like three or four hours together, now sitting on the sofa, now strolling slowly up and down in front of the house, and during this length of time we became close friends.

The sun had set and it was time for me to go. Asya had not yet come back.

"What a self-willed thing she is!" exclaimed Gagin. "Shall I see you home? We could look in at Frau Louise's and find out if Asya's there. It's not much out of your way."

We descended towards the town and turned into a narrow, crooked side-street, where we stopped at a four-storey house, only two windows wide. The second storey jutted into the street over the ground-floor, the third and fourth, jutted out over the second. Its crumbling stonework, the two thick pillars supporting the upper storeys, the steep tiled roof and beak-like projection over the attics, made it look like a huge, crouching bird.

"Asya!" called Gagin. "Are you there?"

We heard the window of a lighted room in the third storey open and saw Asya's dark head. From behind her peered the toothless, blear-eyed face of an elderly German woman.

"Here I am!" cried Asya, leaning her elbows coquettishly on the window-sill. "I'm quite happy. Catch!" she added, throwing a sprig of geranium to Gagin. "Pretend I'm the lady of your heart."

Frau Louise laughed.

"N. is going home," said Gagin. "He wants to say good-bye to you."

"Does he?" said Asya. "In that case give him the flower, I won't be long."

She slammed the window and, I suppose, kissed Frau Louise. Gagin handed me the sprig silently. Silently I put it in my pocket, walked to the bank of the river and was ferried to the opposite side.

I remember that, as I was walking home, not thinking of anything in particular, but with a strange load at my heart, I was suddenly

brought up short by a pungent smell, familiar to me but seldom met with in Germany. I stood still and saw a small bed of hemp by the side of the road. The smell instantly reminded me of my native steppe and I felt terribly homesick. I wanted to breathe Russian air, to tread Russian soil. "What am I doing here, why am I wandering about in a strange land, among strangers?" I exclaimed, and the dead weight at my heart suddenly turned into bitter, burning distress. I arrived home in a mood very different from that of the previous day, in a state of something like anger, which I was unable to shake off for some time. An anguish I could not understand was gnawing at me. At last I sat down to think about my fickle widow (every day ended in solemn recollections of this lady) and got out one of her letters. But I did not even open it, for my thoughts instantly took another turn. I began thinking about ... Asya. It came into my mind that Gagin, in the course of conversation, had hinted at some obstacle to his returning to Russia... "Come now, is she really his sister?" I said out loud.

I undressed, got into bed and tried to go to sleep; but an hour later I sat up in bed again, my elbow thrust into the pillow, and once more gave myself up to thoughts of this "capricious girl with the forced laughter". "...Her figure is like the little Raphael Galatea in the Farnese frescoes," I whispered. "And I'm sure she isn't his sister..."

And the widow's letter lay quietly on the floor, white in the moonbeams.

## V

The next morning I again ferried over to L. I told myself that I wanted to see Gagin, but I was secretly longing to see how Asya would behave, whether she would be up to her tricks again as on the previous day. I found them both in the sitting-room, and, strange to say — perhaps because I had been thinking so much about Russia that night and in the morning — Asya looked to me like a typical Russian girl, yes, just an ordinary girl, almost like a housemaid. In an old frock, her hair brushed behind her ears, she sat quite still at the window, working at an embroidery-frame as modestly and quietly as if she had never done anything else in her life. She hardly spoke and kept her eyes on her work, and her features assumed such an ordinary, prosaic expression that I could not help remem-

bering our home-grown lady's-maids, all those Katyas and Mashas. To complete the resemblance, she began humming a folk song: "Mother, dear mother!" Glancing at her sallow, wan face, I thought of my dreams of yesterday and felt a regret for I knew not what. It was a glorious day. Gagin announced that he was going out sketching. I asked him if I might accompany him, or if I would be in the way.

"On the contrary," he replied. "You can give me good advice."

Putting on a round Van Dyck hat and a smock, he tucked his portfolio under his arm and went out. I followed at his heels. Asya stayed at home. Before he left, Gagin charged her to see that the soup was not too thin. She promised to visit the kitchen. When Gagin reached the valley, now familiar to me, he seated himself on a rock and began to draw an old, hollow oak-tree with spreading branches. I lay on the grass and took a book out of my pocket, but I read no more than a couple of pages, and all he did was to spoil his sheet of paper. We chiefly talked, discussing, as far as I can judge, rather wisely and discerningly, how to work, what to avoid, what system to adopt, and the significance of the artist in our age. Gagin at last decided that he was "not in good form" today, and lay down beside me, and then our youthful discourse flowed freely, and we gave ourselves up to one of those discussions so dear to the Russian heart — by turns ardent, thoughtful and ecstatic but almost invariably vague. We returned home, having chattered to our heart's content, with a feeling of satisfaction, as if we had really accomplished something. I found Asya exactly the same as she had been when I left her. Closely as I observed her, I could now find no trace of coquetry in her, no sign of her playing a part. This time no one could have accused her of affectation.

"Ah," said Gagin, "she is in sackcloth and ashes."

Towards evening she yawned several times unaffectedly and retired early to her room. I myself soon took leave of Gagin and went home, no longer weaving dreams, for it had been a day of sober sensations. While getting into bed, however, I remember I exclaimed involuntarily: "What a chameleon that girl is!" adding after a pause: "And, I'm sure she isn't his sister!"

## VI

Two whole weeks passed during which I went to the Gugins every day. Asya seemed to avoid me, but no longer indulged in any of the freakish whims which had surprised me so much in the first two days of our acquaintance. She seemed to be secretly grieved or embarrassed, she even laughed less. I observed her with curiosity.

She spoke both French and German quite well, but everything about her showed that no feminine hand had guided her through the years of childhood, and that what education she had received had been strange and unusual — altogether different from that of Gugin himself. Despite the Van Dyck hat and artist's smock he exuded the mild atmosphere of a pampered Russian gentleman, whereas she was not at all like a young miss. All her movements were restless; this wilding had not long been grafted, this wine was still in a state of ferment. By nature bashful and timid, she was vexed at her own shyness and tried hard to be bold and independent, but the effect was not always successful. More than once I tried to get her to speak about her life in Russia, her past, but she always answered my questions reluctantly. I did, however, learn that she had lived for a long time in the country before going abroad. One day I found her alone, absorbed in a book. Her head supported by her hands, the fingers thrust into her hair, she was devouring the printed page. "Bravo!" I said, going up to her. "How industrious you are!"

She raised her head and looked at me with solemn austerity.

"You think I can do nothing but laugh," she said, and made as if to go away.

I glanced at the title of her book — it was some French novel.

"I'm afraid I cannot applaud your choice," I remarked.

"What shall I read, then?" she cried, flinging the book down on the table, and adding: "I'd much better go out and have some fun." And she ran into the garden.

In the evening I read *Hermann and Dorothea* aloud to Gugin. At first Asya kept brushing past us, but a little later she came to a stop with her head on one side, sat down quietly beside me, and stayed there listening till the reading was over. The next day, once again I did not know her, until I guessed that she wanted to be staid and housewifely like Dorothea. In a word, she was an enigma for me. She was excessively touchy and sensitive, but she attracted me

even when she made me angry. Of one thing I became surer every day, and that was that she was not Gagins's sister. He did not treat her in a brotherly way — he was too affectionate, too indulgent, and at the same time he seemed to be under a slight strain in her company.

A strange occurrence confirmed my suspicion.

One evening, arriving at the vineyard in which the Gugins lived, I found the gate locked. Without thinking twice about it I made straight for a gap in the wall I had noticed before and got through it. Not far from this place, a little way from the path, there was a small arbour formed of acacia bushes. As I passed it I was startled by Asya's voice speaking with tearful intensity:

"I don't want to love anyone but you — no, no. I only want to love you — to love you forever!"

"Come now, Asya, calm yourself!" said Gagin. "You know I believe you."

Their voices came from the arbour. I could see them both through the loose network of branches. They did not notice me.

"You, only you!" she repeated, throwing herself on his breast and sobbing convulsively, kissing him and pressing closer against him.

"There, there!" he repeated, passing his hand lightly over her hair.

I stood motionless for a moment or two... Then I gave myself a shake. "Shall I go to them? Not for the world!" flashed through my mind. I went back to the wall with rapid strides, jumped over it, and almost ran home. I smiled and rubbed my hands, marvelling at the incident so unexpectedly corroborating my conjecture (I did not for a single moment question its correctness), and at the same time there was bitterness in my heart. They certainly knew how to pretend! But why? Why should they want to fool me? I never expected it of him... And what touching avowals!

## VII

I got up early the next morning after a bad night, shouldered my rucksack, told my landlady not to expect me back for a few days, and climbed up into the mountains, following the bed of the river on which the town of Z. is situated. These mountains form a part of the range known as Dog's Back (Hundsrück) and are very interesting from a geological point of view. Particularly note-



worthy are the regularity and purity of the basalt strata, but I was in no mood for geological observations. I did not quite know what was going on within me, but one feeling was quite clear — I did not wish to see the Gugins any more. I assured myself that the only cause of my sudden dislike for them was anger at their duplicity. Who asked them to give themselves out as relatives? For the rest, I tried to dismiss all thought of them. I roamed about at will over hill and vale, sat in village taverns, conversing with hosts and guests, or lay on a flat, sun-warmed stone and watched the clouds float by, for the weather was marvellous. I spent three days in the leisurely manner, quite enjoying the pastime, though every now and then I felt a pang in my heart. The peaceful scenery of this part of the country was admirably suited to the tenor of my thoughts.

I yielded myself up wholly to chance sensations, to the impressions of the moment. They succeeded one another quietly in my soul, forming, as it were, a single sensation, in which was merged everything I saw, felt, and heard during these three days — the faint smell of resin in the woods, the cries and tappings of woodpeckers, the incessant babbling of transparent brooks with speckled trout on the sandy floor, the gently undulating contours of the mountains, the sombre crags, neat villages, ancient churches and trees, storks in the meadows, cosy water-mills with busily revolving wheels, the friendly faces of the villagers in their blue smocks and grey stockings, the slow, creaking farm-waggons drawn by stout horses or kine, the young, long-haired pilgrims on the well-kept roads, lined on either side with apple- and pear-trees...

To this day I take pleasure in the recollection of all these impressions. Hail to you, humble patch of German soil, with your modest sufficiency, bearing all over you the stamp of industrious hands, of patient, unhurried labour... Hail to you, peace to you!

I returned to my lodgings at the end of the third day. I forgot to say that, in my anger with the Gugins, I made an attempt to revive in my heart the image of the flinty-hearted widow — but my endeavours were unsuccessful. I remember once, as I started to dream about her, my eyes fell on a little peasant girl of some five summers, with a round face and wide, innocent eyes. She was looking at me with such simple-hearted curiosity... Her clear gaze made me feel ashamed, I could not lie in her presence, and from that moment I abandoned the former object of my affections for good and all.

I found a note from Gugin awaiting me at home. He expressed

his astonishment at the suddenness of my departure, scolded me for not taking him with me, and asked me to come and see them as soon as I got back. I read this note with displeasure, but went over to L. the next day.

## VIII

Gagin gave me a friendly welcome, showering affectionate reproaches on me, but Asya burst into causeless laughter the moment she saw me and, as usual, ran away at once. Gagin was embarrassed and, muttering that she must be mad, begged me to forgive her. I admit I was extremely vexed with Asya. I felt ill at ease as it was, and this affected laughter, these odd whims did not improve my spirits. I tried, however, to look as if I noticed nothing, and began telling Gagin all about my short excursion. And he told me what he had been doing in my absence. But the conversation lagged. Asya came into the room again, and again ran out, and at last I announced that I had urgent work to do and that it was time for me to go home. At first Gagin tried to detain me, but after taking an intent look at me he said he would see me home. In the hall Asya suddenly came up and held out her hand to me; I just touched the tips of her fingers and bowed ever so slightly. Gagin and I ferried across the Rhine, and when we reached my favourite ash-tree with the statue of the Madonna between its branches, we sat down on a bench to admire the view. And then a remarkable conversation took place between us.

We talked of this and that for a bit and then fell silent, gazing at the gleaming river.

"Tell me," said Gagin abruptly, with his usual smile, "what is your opinion of Asya? She must seem rather strange to you, I imagine."

"Why, yes," I replied in some surprise. I had not expected him to speak about her.

"You have to know her very well before judging her," he said. "She has a very good heart, but she is a madcap. She's hard to get on with. But she is not to blame, and if you knew her story..."

"Her story?" I interrupted him. "I thought you said she was your..."

Gagin glanced at me.

"Do you think that she isn't my sister? Oh, yes," he continued,

taking no notice of my confusion, "she really is my sister, she is my father's daughter. Look here! I know I can trust you, and I will tell you all about it.

"My father was an extremely kind, wise, well-educated — and luckless man. Fate was not unkind to him than to many others, but he was unable to endure even the very first blow. He married young, for love; his wife, my mother, died very soon after the marriage, when I was only six months old. My father took me to the country and stayed there for twelve whole years. He looked after my education himself and would never have parted with me if his brother, my uncle, had not come to the country to see him. This uncle lived in Petersburg, where he held quite an important post. He persuaded my father to put me in his charge, since nothing would induce him to give up country life. My uncle pointed out to him that it was not good for a boy of my age to live in complete solitude, that under the influence of such a dismal and taciturn mentor as my father was, I was bound to fall behind boys of my own age, and even my disposition might suffer. My father held out against his brother's arguments for a long time, but yielded at last. I wept when I said goodbye to him; I loved him, though I had never seen him smile; but once in Petersburg I soon forgot my dark and melancholy home. I was sent to a cadets' school, from which I went straight into a regiment of the Guards. I returned to the country every year for a week or two, and every year found my father sadder and sadder, more withdrawn, and pensive to the point of timidity. He went to church every day and had almost lost the habit of speech. It was on one of these visits of mine (I was over twenty by then) that I saw a little black-eyed girl of ten or so whom I had never before seen in the house. This was Asya. My father told me she was an orphan he had taken in to shelter and feed — these were his very words. I did not take much notice of her; she was as shy and agile and silent as a little wild beast, and whenever I entered my father's favourite room, the vast, gloomy chamber in which my mother died and where candles had to be lit even in the daytime, she would instantly hide behind his high-backed armchair or the bookcase. It so happened that my military duties prevented me from going to the country for three or four years after this visit. I received a brief letter from my father every month; he seldom mentioned Asya, and then only in passing. He was now over fifty, but still looked like a young man. Imagine, therefore, my horror when, all unsuspecting, I received a letter from the steward, inform-

ing me that my father was mortally ill and begging me to come as soon as possible if I wished to see him before he died. I went at once and found my father alive, but at his last gasp. He was indescribably glad to see me, embraced me with his emaciated arms, looked long into my eyes with a gaze half searching, half imploring, and, making me promise I would fulfil his last request, told his old valet to bring Asya to him. The old man led her in — she was trembling all over and seemed near collapse.

“‘There,’ said my father with an effort, ‘I bequeath to you my daughter — your sister. Yakov will tell you all,’ he added, indicating the old servant. Asya burst into tears and flung herself face down on the bed... Half an hour later my father breathed his last.

“This is what I learned. Asya was the daughter of my father and my late mother’s maid, Tatyana. I can vividly remember this Tatyana, her tall, slender figure, her handsome, severe, clever face, her great dark eyes. She was reputed to be a proud, inaccessible girl. As far as I could make out from Yakov’s respectful understatements, my father had taken up with her a few years after my mother’s death. At that time Tatyana no longer lived in the big house, but made her home with her married sister, who looked after the cattle.

“My father was greatly attached to her and after my departure from the country wanted to marry her, but she would not consent to be his wife, despite his entreaties.

“‘The late Tatyana Vasilyevna,’ Yakov told me, standing at the door with his hands behind his back, ‘was a model of discretion and did not wish to injure your father. “What sort of a wife would I make you? I’m not a fine lady.” That is how she used to answer him. She said it in front of me too.’ Tatyana would not even move to our house, but stayed on in her sister’s cottage, with Asya. In my childhood I only saw Tatyana at church on saints’ days. She always stood among the crowd next to the window, a dark kerchief on her head, a russet-coloured shawl round her shoulders, her austere profile sharply outlined against the clear glass of the window, praying with meek dignity and bowing to the ground in the old-fashioned manner. When my uncle took me away, Asya was only two years old, and when she was eight, she lost her mother.

“Immediately after the death of Tatyana, my father took Asya to live in the big house. He had expressed a desire to have her with him before, but Tatyana would not allow this either. Imagine what it must have done to Asya to find herself suddenly installed

in the big house! To this day she cannot forget the moment when she was clad in a silk dress for the first time and the servants came up to kiss her hand. Her mother had brought her up very strictly; in her father's house she enjoyed absolute freedom. He was her teacher; he was her sole companion. He did not spoil her, or at any rate he did not fondle her, but he loved her passionately and allowed her to do whatever she liked. In his heart he considered he had wronged her. Asya quickly understood that she was the most important person in the house, she knew the master was her father; but she grasped no less quickly the falseness of her position. She developed an inordinate vanity and distrustfulness too. Bad habits took root in her, simplicity vanished. She once admitted to me that she wanted to make the *whole world* forget her origin; she was at one and the same time ashamed, and ashamed of feeling ashamed, and proud of her mother.

"She learnt and knew many things that girls of her age should not know, you see... But is that her fault? She was carried away by her youthful spirits, the young blood pulsed in her veins, and there was no hand to guide her. Complete independence in every way! No light burden, that! She was determined to be as good as other young ladies; she threw herself eagerly into reading. What good could come of all this? Her life, wrong from the outset, developed all wrong, too, but her heart was not corrupted, her mind remained unspoilt.

"And here was I, a young man in my twenties, left with a girl of thirteen on my hands! During the first few days after my father's death the very sound of my voice was enough to send her into a fever, my kindness made her miserable, and it took some time for her to get used to me. True, later, when she realised that I actually regarded her as my sister and was attached to her as a brother, she became passionately fond of me — there are no half-measures about her feelings.

"I took her to Petersburg. Painful as it was for me to part with her, it was quite impossible to keep her with me, and I placed her in one of the best boarding-schools. Asya admitted the necessity of our separation, though she began this period of her life with an illness which almost proved fatal. But she gradually accustomed herself to the boarding-school, in which she stayed for four years. Contrary to my expectations, however, she came out of it quite unchanged. The headmistress was always complaining of her. 'There's no punishing her,' she told me, 'and she does not respond to affection.' Asya was exceedingly bright, and an excellent pupil, the best of them all,

but nothing would induce her to conform, she was obstinate and sulky... I could not find it in my heart to blame her, in her situation she had either to cringe or rebel. Of all her class-mates, the only one with whom she made friends was a poor, plain, downtrodden girl. The others mostly came from good families, they did not like her, and needled and stung her for all they were worth; Asya paid them in the same coin. Once, when the Scripture teacher spoke of vices, Asya remarked in a loud voice: 'Flattery and cowardice are the worst vices.' In a word, she continued in the way she had begun. The only thing she improved in was manners, and even here she does not seem to have made much progress.

"And now she had her seventeenth birthday, and could no longer stay at the boarding-school. I was in a somewhat difficult position. Suddenly I had the happy thought of retiring from the service and going abroad for a year or two, taking Asya with me. And that is what I did, and here we are, she and I, on the banks of the Rhine, where I am trying to occupy myself with art, and she ... behaves as eccentrically and wildly as ever. I hope you will now judge of her more indulgently — you know, whatever she pretends, she does care for other people's opinion — especially yours."

And Gagin again smiled his quiet smile. I pressed his hand hard.

"That's all very well," he said, returning to the subject, "but I am having a hard time with her. She's so headstrong. So far she hasn't taken an interest in men, but when she does fall in love!.. Sometimes I am at my wits' end. What d'you think she took into her head the other day? First she declares that I have turned cold to her, and then goes on to say she loves no one but me and will never love anyone else her whole life... And how she cried..."

"Oh, so that..." I began and checked myself instantly.

"Tell me," I asked (we were now talking quite frankly), "d'you mean to say she has never found anyone she could like? She must have met young men in Petersburg."

"She didn't like them a bit. No — Asya must have a hero, a remarkable person — or else a picturesque shepherd in a mountain pass. But I've kept you chattering on like this," he added, getting up.

"Look here," I said, "let's go back, I don't want to go home."

"And your work?"

I made no reply.

Gagin smiled good-humouredly and we returned to L.

When I saw the familiar vineyard and the little white house

on the crest of the hill, I was aware of a sensation of sweetness — yes, sweetness — within me, just as if honey were trickling into my heart. I felt much better since hearing Gagin's story.

## IX

Asya met us at the door; I was quite prepared for another burst of laughter, but she came towards us pale and silent, her eyes lowered.

"Here he is again," said Gagin, "and he offered to come himself, mark that!"

Asya looked at me questioningly. I myself now put out my hand to her and this time pressed her cold fingers heartily. I felt very sorry for her; I now understood much that had formerly puzzled me in her; her restlessness, her inability to behave properly, her desire to show off — all had become clear to me. I had had a glimpse into this soul — a secret urge drove her continually, her immature vanity gave her no peace, but she strove with all her being for truth. I realised what it was that had attracted me to this strange girl; it was not only the half-savage charm of her physical self, it was her soul I loved.

Gagin began rummaging among his drawings; I proposed to Asya a stroll about the vineyard. She agreed at once, with gay, almost submissive readiness. Halfway down the slope we sat down on a great stone.

"And didn't you miss us a bit?" began Asya.

"Did you miss me?" I countered.

Asya cast a sidelong glance at me.

"Yes," she answered, and went on immediately: "Was it nice in the mountains? Are they very high? Higher than the clouds? Tell me what you saw. You told my brother, but I didn't hear anything."

"You chose to go away," I remarked.

"I went away ... because... But I'm not going away now," she added confidently. "You were cross today, you know."

"I — cross!"

"Yes, you!"

"Why on earth should I have been cross?"

"I don't know, but you were cross when you came, and you went away cross. I was sorry you went away like that, and I'm ever so glad you came back."

"And I'm glad I came back," I said.

Asya hunched her shoulders, the way children sometimes do when they are pleased.

"Oh, I can always tell what people are feeling," she went on. "I used to be able to tell, just from the way Papa coughed in the next room, whether he was pleased with me or not."

Up to this moment Asya had never once mentioned her father to me. Her doing so now affected me strongly.

"Did you love your father?" I asked and suddenly, to my intense mortification, felt that I was blushing.

She did not answer, and blushed too. We both remained silent. A steamer sped down the Rhine, trailing smoke. We watched it.

"Why don't you tell me about the mountains?" whispered Asya.

"What made you laugh the moment you saw me today?" I asked.

"I don't know. Sometimes I laugh when I really want to cry. You mustn't judge me by what I ... do. Oh, by the way, how lovely the legend of the Lorelei is. That's *her* rock over there, isn't it? They say she used to drown everyone at first, but when she fell in love she threw herself into the river. I like that story. Frau Louise tells me all sorts of fairy tales. Frau Louise has a black cat with yellow eyes..."

Asya raised her head and shook back her curls.

"Oh, I'm so happy!" she said.

At that moment some monotonous, desultory sounds reached our hearing. A religious chant was being intoned by hundreds of voices — a crowd of pilgrims was moving along the road below with crosses and gonfalons.

"I wish I could go with them," said Asya, straining her ears to catch the receding bursts of the song.

"Why, are you so pious?"

"I should like to go somewhere far, far away, to pray, to perform some difficult feat," she continued. "For the days pass and life goes on, and what have we ever done?"

"You are ambitious," I remarked. "You would like your life to pass not in vain, you want to leave a trace behind you..."

"And do you think that is impossible?"

My lips were going to frame the word "impossible" ... but looking into her luminous eyes I only said: "Try."

"Tell me," said Asya after a short pause, while shadows raced across her face, which was again pale, "did you like that lady very much?.. You know, the one my brother drank to in the ruins, the day after we first met."



I laughed.

"Your brother was joking. I've never liked any lady very much. There's nobody I like now, at any rate."

"And what do you like in women?" asked Asya, throwing back her head in her innocent curiosity.

"What a funny question!" I exclaimed.

Asya was a little embarrassed.

"I ought not to ask you such questions, ought I? Forgive me, I'm used to blurting out the first thing that comes into my head. That's why I'm afraid of talking."

"Talk away, for goodness' sake, don't be afraid," I said. "I'm so glad you've got over your shyness at last."

Asya lowered her eyes and gave a low, short laugh. I had never heard her laugh like that before.

"Go on," she pleaded, smoothing her skirt over her legs as if she meant to settle down for a long time. "Talk to me, or recite something, the way you read *Onegin* to us that time..."

She stopped speaking, and then said, under her breath:

*Where is the cross, the shadow of the boughs,  
Above the grave of my unhappy mother!*

"You've got it wrong," I remarked. "Pushkin speaks of his nanny's grave."

"I should like to have been Tatyana," she went on, as pensively as before. "But do go on!" she exclaimed with sudden animation.

But I was in no mood for talking. I sat looking at her, bathed in the bright sunlight, serene and docile. There was a radiance all around — below us, above us — the sky, the earth, the water. The very air seemed to be saturated with brilliance.

"See how beautiful everything is!" I said, involuntarily lowering my voice.

"Beautiful!" she replied, also lowering her voice, and not looking at me. "If we were birds, how we would soar, how we would fly... How we would plunge into all that blueness... But we are not birds."

"We might grow wings," I said.

"How?"

"Live and learn. There are feelings which raise us above the earth. Don't worry, you'll have wings one day yourself."

"Have you ever had them?"

"Well, it's hard to say... I don't think I've ever flown yet."

Asya was silent again. I bent slightly over her.

"Can you waltz?" she asked abruptly.

"Yes, I can," I replied, somewhat puzzled.

"Come on, then, come on! I'll ask my brother to play a waltz for us... We'll pretend we're flying, we'll pretend we have wings."

She ran back to the house. I ran after her, and a few minutes later we were circling the cramped sitting-room to the sweet sounds of a Lanner waltz. Asya waltzed beautifully, with inspiration. Something soft and feminine suddenly showed itself through the virginal austerity of her appearance. My hand retained the sensation of contact with her slender waist for a long time, and it was long before I could forget the sound of her rapid breathing so near me, the dark, still, half-closed eyes in the pale yet animated face, framed in curls.

## X

The whole of that day passed in the happiest possible manner. We frolicked like children. Asya was very sweet and simple. Gagin was glad to see her like this. It was quite late when I left them. When the boat was in mid-stream I asked the ferryman to let it drift on the current. The old man stopped rowing, and the majestic river bore us on its bosom. I looked round, listening and remembering, and I suddenly felt a secret anxiety at my heart... I looked up at the sky — but even in the sky there was no peace; studded with stars, it was in constant motion and palpitation. I leaned over the water ... but here, too, in the dark cold depths, the stars shimmered and quivered. I could feel a kind of restless anxiety everywhere, and anxiety grew in myself, too. I leaned on the rim of the boat... The whispering of the breeze in my ears, the soft gurgling of the water round the stern, troubled and stirred me, and the freshness rising from the waves did not cool me. A nightingale burst into song on the bank, infecting my blood with the sweet poison of its call. Tears welled up in my eyes, but they were not tears of vague ecstasy. What I was now feeling was no longer the mere sensation of all-embracing desire, causing the soul to expand, to sing, to feel that there is love and understanding in it for the whole of creation... No, it was the thirst for happiness that was now consuming me. I did not venture as yet to give it a name, but what I desired was happiness, surfeiting happiness... And the boat floated on, the old ferryman bending dreamily over the oars.

## XI

As I set off the next day for the Gugins', I did not ask myself if I was in love with Asya. But I thought about her a great deal, her fate interested me keenly. I was glad we had at last drawn nearer to one another. I felt I had only begun to know her since the day before — up till then she had always turned away from me. And now that she had at last opened out to me, what an entrancing light illumined my image of her, how new this image was for me, what secret bashful charms were latent in its depths!

I strode briskly up the familiar path, keeping my gaze fixed on the little house from the moment it appeared — a mere blur of white in the distance. Far from thinking about the future, I did not even think about the morrow — I was perfectly content.

Asya blushed when I came into the room; I noticed that she was again dressed up, but her expression did not match her attire — it was so melancholy. And I had come in such a jolly mood! I even thought that she had just been going to run away as usual, but had made an effort — and remained. Gagin was in one of those fits of artistic frenzy which suddenly come over amateurs when they fancy that they have contrived, as they express it, "to catch the landscape by the tail". He stood before his canvas, dishevelled and paint-stained, and nodded to me almost savagely, with a sweeping flourish of the paintbrush over its surface, stepped back, narrowed his eyes, and once more fell upon the picture he was working on. I refrained from disturbing him and sat down beside Asya. Her dark eyes turned slowly towards me.

"You're not the same as you were yesterday," I said after several vain attempts to bring a smile to her lips.

"No, I'm not," she answered slowly. "It doesn't matter, though. I slept badly, I lay awake all night, thinking."

"What about?"

"Oh, about all sorts of things. It's been a habit of mine ever since I was a child, ever since the time I lived with my mother..."

She brought out the last word with an effort, and forced herself to repeat:

"Ever since the time I lived with my mother ... I used to wonder why nobody ever knew what was going to happen; and why you sometimes saw misfortune coming but could not evade it; and why you could never tell the whole truth... And then I thought to myself — I know nothing. I must learn. I need to be educated all over

again, I have been very badly brought up. I can't play the piano, I can't draw, I can't even sew properly. I have no accomplishments, I must be very poor company."

"You are not being fair to yourself," I told her. "You've read a lot, you're well-educated, and with your brains..."

"D'you think I'm clever?" she asked with such naive curiosity that I could not help laughing, but she did not even smile. "Brother, am I clever?" she asked, addressing Gagin.

He did not answer, but went on with his work, incessantly changing his brushes and raising his hand high in the air.

"Sometimes I don't know myself what there is in my head," continued Asya, with the same pensive look. "Sometimes I'm afraid of myself — really I am! I wish... Is it true that women ought not to read much?"

"Not too much, of course, but..."

"Tell me what I ought to read, tell me what I ought to do. I'll do everything you tell me," she added, turning to me with naive confidence.

I was at a loss for an answer.

"You won't find me dull company?"

"Heavens, no!" I began.

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" she cried. "I was afraid you might." And her small, hot hand pressed mine firmly.

Gagin called out to me at that moment, "Don't you think the background is too dark?"

I went over to him. Asya got up and left the room.

## XII

She returned an hour later and beckoned to me from the doorway.

"Tell me," she said, "if I died, would you be sorry?"

"What strange thoughts come into your head today!"

"I keep thinking I shall die soon; sometimes it seems to me as if everyone were saying good-bye to me. Better die than live like this... You needn't look at me that way — I'm not pretending, truly, I'm not! I'll be afraid of you again if you do!"

"Were you really afraid of me?"

"It's not my fault I'm so queer," she continued. "Look, I can't even laugh any more..."

She remained mournful and preoccupied all day. Something was going on in her mind which I could not understand. Her gaze rested

frequently on me; my heart seemed to cringe under this enigmatic gaze. Though she appeared perfectly calm, I felt continually impelled to beg her not to be agitated. Watching her, I found a pathetic charm in her now pale face, in her irresolute, slow movements; and she, for some reason or other, imagined that I was out of sorts.

"D'you know what?" she said, when I was making up my mind to leave. "I can't help being worried by the thought that you consider me frivolous... Promise me you will always believe everything I say — and you must be frank with me, too. And I'll always tell the truth, honestly I will..."

Her "honestly" made me laugh again.

"Don't laugh!" she said eagerly. "Or I'll ask you today what you asked me yesterday: 'Why are you laughing?'" And she added after a pause: "Do you remember what you said about wings yesterday? My wings have grown, but there's nowhere to fly to..."

"Come, now!" I said. "The whole world is open to you..."

Asya looked me straight in the eyes.

"You're displeased with me today," she said, frowning.

"I? Displeased with you?"

"Why are you two so glum?" interrupted Gagin, addressing me. "Shall I play you a waltz, like yesterday?"

"No! No!" cried Asya, clasping her hands. "Not today — not for the world..."

"Nobody's forcing you — don't get excited..."

"Not for the world!" she repeated, turning pale.

"Can it be that she loves me?" I wondered, as I approached the swift-rolling Rhine.

### XIII

"Can it be that she loves me?" I asked myself the next day, the moment I woke up. I had no desire to look into my own heart. I felt that her image, the image of "the girl with the affected laugh", had taken hold of my heart, and that it would not be easy to get rid of it. I went to L. and stayed there the whole day; but I only saw Asya for a moment. She was unwell, her head ached. She came downstairs for a moment, a bandage over her forehead, looking pale and wan, her

eyes almost closed. Smiling faintly, she said: "It'll pass, it's nothing. Everything passes, doesn't it?" and went out of the room. I was left with a feeling of ennui and a hollow sadness. But I could not bring myself to leave, and it was late when I at last took my departure, without having seen her again.

The next morning passed in a kind of trance. I tried to take up some work, but could not. I tried to do nothing and think about nothing ... but that was no good, either. I roamed about the town, went home again, and again went out.

"Are you Mr. N.?" I heard a child calling me. I looked round — a small boy stood before me. "This is from Fräulein Annette," he said, handing me a note.

Opening it, I recognised Asya's swift, irregular handwriting. "I must see you," she wrote. "Be at the stone chapel on the road, near the ruins, at four today. I have done something very rash today... For God's sake, come, you will know all... Tell the messenger: 'Yes.'"

"Any answer?" the boy asked.

"Say — 'yes,'" I told him. The boy ran off.

#### XIV

Going back to my room, I sat down and gave myself up to my thoughts. My heart was beating violently. I read Asya's note again and again. I looked at the clock — it was not yet twelve.

The door opened and Gagin came in.

His face was sombre. He seized my hand and pressed it firmly. He seemed to be greatly agitated.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

He moved up a chair and sat down opposite me. "Four days ago," he said with a forced smile, stammering slightly, "I told you a story which surprised you. Today I am going to surprise you still more. I wouldn't dare to be so frank if it was anyone but you. But you are a gentleman, you are my friend, aren't you? Now listen to me — Asya, my sister, is in love with you."

I started violently and half rose in my chair...

"Your sister, you say..."

"Yes, yes," he interrupted me. "She's mad, I tell you, and she will drive me mad. But luckily she is unable to lie — and she trusts me. What a heart that girl has! But she'll ruin herself, I know she will..."

"You must be mistaken," I said.

"Not a bit of it. Yesterday, as you know, she stayed in bed almost all day and would not eat, but she did not complain ... she never complains. I did not worry, though she became a little feverish towards evening. At two o'clock in the morning our landlady woke me up — 'Come to your sister,' she said, 'she's in a bad way.' I hurried to Asya and found her not undressed, feverish, and in tears. Her forehead was burning, her teeth chattered. 'What's the matter?' I asked. 'Are you ill?' She threw her arms round my neck, imploring me to take her away as soon as possible if I did not want her to die... I couldn't understand a thing, and tried to calm her... Her sobbing became still more violent ... and suddenly, through her sobs, I ... in a word, I heard her say she was in love with you. I assure you, rational folk like you and me can have no idea of the depths of her emotions and of the violent form these emotions take with her. They overwhelm her as suddenly and irresistibly as a thunderstorm. Of course, I can see you are a nice person," went on Gagin, "but why she should have fallen in love with you like this, I confess is beyond me. She says she took to you at first sight. That's why she cried the other day when she assured me she wanted to love no one but me. She has taken it into her head that you despise her, that you probably know all about her. She asked me if I had told you her story. I told her I hadn't, of course. But her intuition is something terrifying. She only wants one thing — to go away, to go away this very minute. I sat with her till the morning. She made me swear that we would be gone by tomorrow, and only then she slept. I thought and thought and decided to speak to you. I consider Asya is right. The best thing is for us both to leave this place. I would have taken her away today if an idea had not come into my head which prevented me. Perhaps ... after all ... you like my sister? If so, then why should I take her away? And so I decided, discarding all shame... Besides, I've noticed something myself... I decided ... to ask you..." Poor Gagin broke off in confusion. "Forgive me," he said. "I've never been in such straits before."

I took his hand.

"You want to know," I said in firm tones, "if I like your sister? I do like her..."

Gagin glanced at me. "But," he stammered, "you don't want to marry her, do you?"

"How do you expect me to answer a question like that? Ask yourself if I could, right now..."

"I know, I know!" he interrupted me. "I have no right whatever to demand a reply, and my question was the height of indelicacy... But

what am I to do? You can't trifle with fire. You don't know Asya — she's capable of falling ill, of running away, of making a rendezvous with you... Another girl would be able to conceal everything and wait — but not she. It's the first time it ever happened to her — that's the trouble. If you had seen her today, sobbing at my feet, you would understand my fears."

I pondered. Gagin's words "a rendezvous with you" stabbed me to the heart. It seemed unworthy not to answer his frankness with equal frankness.

"Yes," I said at last. "You are right. An hour ago I received a letter from your sister. Here it is."

Gagin seized the note, ran his eyes rapidly over it, and let his hands fall on to his knees. The expression of astonishment on his face was extremely comic, but I was in no mood for laughing.

"I said you were an honourable man, and I say it again," he told me, "but what's to be done now? What? She wants to go away, and she writes to you, reproaching herself for rashness... And when did she find the time to write? What does she want of you?"

I calmed him and we began discussing as coolly as we could what was to be done.

And this is the decision we at last came to: in order to avert catastrophe, I was to go to the rendezvous and have a frank talk with Asya. Gagin undertook to stay at home and give no sign that he knew about her letter. And in the evening we were to meet again.

"I count on you," said Gagin, squeezing my hand. "Be merciful to her — and to me. We'll go away tomorrow anyhow," he added, getting up, "because you're not going to marry Asya, are you?"

"Give me time, till the evening," I said.

"Very well — but you won't marry her."

He went away and I flung myself on the sofa and closed my eyes. My head was spinning, the multitude of new ideas forced upon it had set my brain in a whirl. I was vexed with Gagin for his frankness, I was vexed with Asya, too, whose love both flattered and embarrassed me. I could not understand what had made her tell her brother everything; the necessity to come to a rapid, almost instantaneous decision was agonising...

"Marry a seventeen-year-old girl with a temper like hers?" I said, rising from the sofa. "How can I?"



## XV

I ferried over the Rhine at the appointed hour, and the first person I met on the opposite bank was the same little boy who had come to me in the morning. He had apparently been waiting for me.

"From Fräulein Annette," he whispered and handed me another note.

Asya informed me of a change in the place of our rendezvous. I was to go in an hour and a half, not to the chapel, but to Frau Louise's house, where I must knock at the street door and go up to the third floor.

"Again — 'yes'?" the boy asked me.

"Yes," I repeated and walked off along the bank of the Rhine. There was not time enough to go home, and I did not wish to roam the streets. Beyond the walls of the town was a little park with a covered bowling-alley and tables for beer-drinkers. I went there. A few middle-aged Germans were playing skittles; the wooden balls rolled noisily, and every now and then cries of admiration were heard. A pretty waitress with eyes red from crying brought me a mug of beer. I looked into her face. She turned away quickly and left me.

"Yes, yes," said a stout, red-cheeked townsman sitting next to me, "our Hannchen is very unhappy today — her sweetheart has enlisted in the army."

I looked at her — she stood huddled in a corner and stood there, cupping her face in her hands; tears rolled down her fingers, one at a time. Someone called for beer; she brought him a mug and went straight back to her corner. Her sorrow affected me; I began thinking of the rendezvous in store for me, and my thoughts were grave and anxious. I was going to this rendezvous with a heavy heart; it was not to yield to the delights of mutual love that I was going, but to keep my word, to fulfil an onerous duty. "You can't trifle with her" — Gagin's words had penetrated my heart like the barb of an arrow. And only four days ago, drifting with the current in the ferry-boat, had I not been filled with a yearning for happiness? Now this happiness was possible, and I hesitated, I pushed it away from me, I was compelled to push it away from me... Its suddenness had thrown me into confusion. And Asya herself, this attractive but strange being, so hot-headed, saddled with such a past, such an upbringing — I admit she frightened me. Conflicting feelings battled within me. The appointed hour drew near. "I cannot marry her," I decided at last. "She shall not know that I love her too."

I got up and, putting a thaler into poor Hannchen's hand (she did

not even thank me), set off for the house of Frau Louise. The shadows of evening were already falling, and the narrow strip of sky above the dark street was crimson in the reflected glow of the sunset. I knocked softly on the door, which opened immediately. I crossed the threshold and found myself in utter darkness.

"This way," said an old woman's voice. "You are expected."

I took a step or two in the direction of the voice, and a bony hand grasped mine.

"Is it you, Frau Louise?" I asked.

"Yes," replied the same voice. "Yes, my fine young man, it is I."

The old lady led me up a steep staircase and stopped on the third floor landing. By the faint light filtering through a tiny window I could see the wrinkled countenance of the burgomaster's widow. Stretching her sunken lips in a honeyed smile and screwing up her bleary eyes, she pointed to a small door. I opened it with an unsteady hand and slammed it shut behind me.

## XVI

It was rather dark in the small room in which I now found myself, and I did not see Asya at once. She was seated in a chair at the window, her head turned away and almost concealed by the huge shawl wrapped round her, and she looked like a frightened bird. She was breathing fast and trembling all over. I felt an indescribable pity for her. I went up to her. She turned her head still further away...

"Anna Nikolayevna," I said.

She straightened herself and tried to look at me — but could not. I seized her hand; it was very cold and lay lifeless in my palm.

"I meant," she began, and she tried to smile, but her pale lips refused to obey her. "I meant... No, I can't!" she exclaimed, and said no more. And indeed her voice had failed her at every word.

I sat down beside her.

"Anna Nikolayevna," I said again, and I, too, could not go on.

A silence ensued. I sat there holding her hand and looking at her. She was huddled up in the shawl, breathing with difficulty and biting her lower lip in order not to cry, in order to keep back her rising tears. I looked at her — her timid stillness was pathetically helpless, as if in her exhaustion she had only just managed to reach a chair and had fallen into it. My heart melted...

"Asya," I said almost inaudibly...

She slowly raised her eyes to my face... Oh, a woman's glance at the man she loves! Who shall describe it? They implored, those eyes, they trusted, they questioned, they yielded... I could not withstand their charm. Thin flames tingled like needles in my veins — I bent over and pressed my lips to her hand. An agitated sound — something like a quivering sigh — came to my ears, and I felt a light touch, a hand trembling like a leaf, on my hair. I raised my head and saw her face. How transformed it had become all at once! The expression of fear had vanished from it, the gaze seemed to have retreated deep within her, drawing me after it, the lips were slightly parted, the brow as pale as marble, and the curls thrown back as if tossed by the wind. I forgot all, I drew her to me, her hand submitted meekly, her whole body followed the hand, the shawl slipped from her shoulders, and her head lay meekly on my breast, under my burning lips...

"I'm yours," she whispered almost inaudibly.

My hands slipped down to her waist... But suddenly the memory of Gagin flashed over me like lightning.

"What are we doing?" I cried, and started back. "Your brother ... he knows all. He knows that I am seeing you..."

Asya sank back on to the chair.

"Yes," I continued, getting up and going over to the far corner of the room. "Your brother knows all... I was obliged to tell him all..."

"Obliged?" she repeated indistinctly. It was obvious that she had not yet come to her senses and could scarcely understand what I said.

"Yes," I said with inexplicable vehemence. "And it's all your fault! Why did you have to give yourself away? Who made you tell your brother everything? He came to me today himself and told me what you had said to him." I tried not to look at Asya and began striding up and down the room. "Everything has been wrecked now, everything!"

Asya made as if to rise from her chair.

"Sit down," I cried. "Sit down, please. You are dealing with an honourable man — yes, an honourable man. Tell me, for God's sake, what it was that upset you so? Did you notice any change in me? When your brother came to see me today, I could not conceal the truth from him."

"What am I saying?" I asked myself, and the thought that I was a callous deceiver, that Gagin knew about our rendezvous, that everything had been distorted, exposed, made my brain reel.

"I didn't send for my brother," came in Asya's terrified whisper. "He came himself."

"See what you have done!" I went on. "Now you want to go away..."

"Yes, I must go," she said as softly as before. "That's why I asked you to come here, I wanted to say good-bye."

"And do you think," I said, "it is easy for me to part with you?"

"But why did you tell my brother?" asked Asya in puzzled tones.

"I tell you I could not do otherwise. If you hadn't given yourself away..."

"I locked myself into my room," she said simply. "I did not know the landlady had another key."

This artless excuse from her lips at such a moment made me almost angry ... and now I cannot think of it without being moved. Poor, honest, sincere child!

"And now everything is over," I began again. "Everything. Now we must part." I cast a furtive glance at Asya. She suddenly flushed. I realised that she had become ashamed and alarmed. I myself was moving and speaking in a kind of fever. "You wouldn't let the feeling that was just beginning to unfold itself to mature naturally, you have destroyed the ties between us yourself, you could not trust me, you doubted me..."

While I was speaking, Asya bent further and further forward, till she suddenly fell on her knees, dropped her head into her hands, and sobbed. I rushed over to her and tried to raise her, but she resisted me. I cannot stand the sight of a woman's tears, it makes me lose my head completely.

"Anna Nikolayevna, Asya," I repeated. "I implore you, for God's sake, stop crying..." Once again I took her by the hand...

But to my great astonishment she suddenly leaped to her feet, rushed to the door with the rapidity of lightning, and disappeared.

When, a few minutes later, Frau Louise came into the room, I was still standing in the middle of the floor as if I had been struck by lightning. I could not understand how it was that this rendezvous had ended so quickly, so ineptly, when I had not expressed a hundredth part of what I had to say, what I ought to have said, when I did not even know yet what the outcome might be...

"Has Fräulein Annette gone?" asked Frau Louise, raising her sandy brows till they almost touched the edge of her toupee.

I looked at her blankly and went away.

## XVII

I made my way out of the town and walked on till I got to open country. I was devoured by furious vexation... I showered reproaches upon myself. How could I have failed to guess the cause which had compelled Asya to change the place of our rendezvous, to realise what it had cost her to go to this old woman? Why had I not prevented her from leaving me! Alone with her in that remote, almost dark room, I had found the strength, the gall, to repulse her, even to reproach her... And now her image haunted me, I implored her forgiveness. The remembrance of that pale face, those moist, timid eyes, the hair hanging limp on her bent neck, the light touch of her head on my breast, seemed to burn me. "I'm yours..." I heard the whisper again... "I obeyed the dictates of conscience," I assured myself... But it was not true. Was this the consummation I had desired? Was I capable of parting with her? Could I endure to lose her? "Madman! Madman!" I repeated bitterly...

In the meantime night was falling. I strode back to the house in which Asya lived.

## XVIII

Gagin came out to me.

"Did you meet my sister?" he called from the distance.

"Isn't she at home?" I asked.

"No."

"Didn't she come back?"

"No. Forgive me," continued Gagin, "but I couldn't help it—contrary to our agreement, I went to the chapel. She wasn't there. I suppose she didn't come, then."

"She wasn't at the chapel."

"And you didn't meet her?"

I was forced to admit that I had met her.

"Where?"

"At Frau Louise's. I parted with her an hour ago," I added. "I was sure she had gone home."

"We'll wait," said Gagin.

We went into the house and sat down side by side. Neither

spoke. We both felt exceedingly awkward. We kept looking up, glancing towards the door, straining our ears.

At last Gagin rose.

"This is impossible!" he exclaimed. "I don't know what to do with myself. She'll be the death of me, really she will... Let's go and look for her."

We went out. It was now quite dark.

"What did you talk about?" asked Gagin, pulling his hat down over his brows.

"I was with her only five minutes," I said. "I told her what we had agreed upon."

"I'll tell you what," he said, "we'd better separate. We're more likely to come on her. In any case come back here in an hour."

## XIX

I ran down the slope leading from the vineyard and rushed back to the town. I rapidly made the rounds of all the streets, looked everywhere, even into Frau Louise's windows, returned to the bank of the Rhine and ran along it... Every now and then I caught sight of a woman's figure, but Asya was nowhere to be seen. It was no longer vexation which devoured me, I was tormented by a secret fear, and it was not only fear which I felt—I now felt remorse, a burning regret, love—yes, the tenderest love! I wrung my hands, I called her name through the gathering darkness of the night, first under my breath, and then louder and louder. A hundred times I repeated that I loved her, I vowed never more to part with her. I would have given everything in the world to hold her cold hand again, to hear her low voice again, to see her before me again... She had been so near to me, she had come to me so resolutely in the innocence of her love, she had brought me her untouched youth... And I had not held her close to my heart. I had thrown away the bliss of seeing her sweet face brighten with the joy of ecstasy... This thought almost drove me mad.

"Where can she have gone? What can she have done with herself?" I cried in impotent despair... Something white suddenly appeared on the very bank of the river. I knew this place; there, over the grave of a man who had drowned himself seventy years before, stood, half buried in the ground, a stone cross with an ancient inscription. My heart almost stopped... I ran up to the

cross — the white figure had disappeared. "Asya!" I shouted. The wild sound of my own voice frightened me — but no one answered...

I decided to go and see if Gagin had found her.

## XX

As I rushed up the path through the vineyard, I saw a light in Asya's room... This calmed me slightly.

I went up to the house; the front door was bolted. I knocked. An unlighted window in the lower floor was cautiously opened, and Gagin poked out his head.

"Did you find her?" I asked.

"She's come back," he replied in a whisper. "She's in her room, undressing. Everything's all right."

"Thank God!" I exclaimed in unspeakable relief and joy. "Thank God! Now everything will be splendid. But we shall have to have another talk, you know."

"Another time," he said, drawing the window-pane gently towards him. "Another time. And now good-bye."

"Till tomorrow," I said. "Everything will be settled tomorrow."

"Good-bye!" repeated Gagin. The window was closed.

I was on the point of tapping on the pane. I wanted to tell Gagin there and then that I was asking him for his sister's hand. But it did not seem the moment... "Till tomorrow," I thought. "Tomorrow I will be a happy man."

Tomorrow I was to be happy. But happiness knows no morrow; nor has it any yesterday. Happiness forgets the past and takes no thought for the future. It knows only the present — and that not a day, but a moment.

I do not remember how I got back to Z. It was not my legs that carried me, nor a boat that bore me—broad powerful wings wafted me across. I passed a bush on which a nightingale was singing, and stood for a long time listening to its song. It seemed to me it was singing of my love and of my happiness.

## XXI

As I approached the familiar dwelling the next morning, I was startled by the fact that all the windows were wide open, and the door, too. Some bits of paper lay about in front of it; a maid-servant with a broom appeared in the doorway.

I went up to her...

"They've gone," she called out before I had time to ask her if Gagin was at home.

"Gone?" I echoed. "What d'you mean? Where have they gone?"

"They left this morning, at six o'clock, and they didn't say where they were going. Wait a minute — aren't you Mr. N.?"

"Yes."

"They left a letter with the mistress for you."

The maid went upstairs and came back holding a letter. "This is for you."

"It can't be... How..." I blurted out. The girl looked at me blankly and resumed her sweeping.

I opened the letter. It was from Gagin — not a word from Asya. He began by telling me not to be angry with him for his sudden departure. He was sure that, on mature reflection, I would approve of his decision. He had been unable to find any other way out of a situation which might have become difficult and dangerous. "Last night," he said, "while we both sat in silence waiting for Asya, I became finally convinced of the necessity for a separation. There are certain prejudices which I respect. I understand that you could not marry Asya. She told me all. I was obliged to pacify her by yielding to her repeated, earnest requests." He finished up by expressing regret that our friendship had ended so quickly, wished me luck, assured me of his regard, and begged me not to try and find them.

"What prejudices?" I exclaimed, as if he could have heard me. "What nonsense! What right had you to take her away from me?" I clutched at my temples...

The servant called out loudly to the landlady; her alarm forced me to take myself in hand. One idea consumed my whole being — to find them, to find them at all costs. I could not submit to the blow, could not reconcile myself to such a solution of the problem. I learned from the landlady that they had gone aboard a steamer at six in the morning. I went to the ticket-office. There I was told they had taken tickets to Cologne. I rushed home, intending to pack my things and take the next boat after them. My way lay past the house of Frau Louise... Suddenly I heard my name called. Looking up, I saw the burgomaster's widow at the window of the very room in which I had seen Asya yesterday. She smiled her revolting smile and called to me. I turned away and was just going to pass on when she called out that



she had something for me. These words brought me to a stop and I went into the house. How shall I describe my feelings on finding myself in that room again?

"I was only to give you this," began the old woman, showing me a small note, "if you came to me yourself, but you're such a nice young man. Take it."

I took the note.

On a tiny scrap of paper the following words were hurriedly pencilled:

"Good-bye, we shall never meet again. It is not out of pride that I am leaving — but because it is the only thing I can do. When I wept in front of you yesterday, if you had said one word to me, just one word, I would have stayed. You did not say it. It must be that everything is for the best... Good-bye forever!"

One word... Oh, how mad I had been! That word... I had uttered it with tears the day before, I had lavished it on the empty air, I had repeated it in the open fields ... but I had not said it to her, I had not told her that I loved her ... but I could not have uttered that word then. When I met her in that fatal room, I was not yet clearly aware of my love for her. It was not aroused even when I was sitting, in blank stupor and strained silence, beside her brother ... it had only sprung into irrepressible life a few minutes later when, terrified that a tragedy had occurred, I began searching for her, calling her ... but it was too late then. "But that's impossible!" you will tell me. I do not know if it is possible, but I do know it is true. Asya would never have gone away if there had been the slightest shadow of coquetry in her and if she had not found herself in such a false situation. She could not endure what any other girl would have endured — I had not understood this. My evil genius had checked the declaration on my lips at my last meeting with Gagin in front of the dark window, and the last straw had slipped from my hands.

That same day I returned to the town of L. with my luggage and took the steamer to Cologne. I remember, just as the steamer got under way and I was taking a mental farewell of those streets, of all those places which I was never to forget, I caught sight of Hannchen. She was sitting on a bench on the bank of the river. Her face was pale but not sad. A handsome youth stood beside her, telling her something and laughing. And across the Rhine my little Madonna peered as wistfully as ever through the dark foliage of the old ash-tree.

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## XXII

At Cologne I learned that the Gugins had gone to London, and I followed them there. But in London all my efforts to find them were futile. I persisted in the search for a long time, refusing to reconcile myself to failure, but at last had to give up all hope of ever finding them.

And I never saw them again — I never saw Asya again. Vague rumours about her brother reached me occasionally, but she had disappeared from me forever. I don't even know whether she's alive or dead. A few years ago, when I was abroad, I caught sight of a woman in a railway carriage whose face vividly brought back the unforgettable features... But no doubt I was deceived by a chance likeness. In my memory Asya remains the girl I once knew in the happiest time of my life, the girl I saw for the last time huddled up in a low wooden chair.

I must, however, confess that I did not grieve for her so very long. I even found that fate had done well in not uniting Asya and me. I consoled myself with the thought that I should most likely not have been happy with a wife like her. I was young then — and the future, really so short, so swift, seemed infinite to me. "Could not the same thing happen again," I asked myself, "and be still better, still more beautiful?" I have been intimate with other women, but the love which Asya aroused in me — that ardent, tender, profound love — has never repeated itself. No other eyes have ever replaced for me those which were once fixed on me so lovingly; to no other heart which has rested against my breast has my own heart responded with such sweet, joyous pangs. Doomed to the solitary life of a lonely bachelor, I am living out the tedious years, but I preserve as sacred relics her note and a withered sprig of geranium — the flower she once threw to me out of the window. Till this day it retains a faint perfume, and the hand which gave it to me, that hand which I was able only once to press to my lips, has perhaps long been mouldering in the grave. And I — what has come of me? What is left of me, of those blissful, tumultuous days, those winged hopes and aspirations? The faint exhalations of an insignificant flower have survived all the joys and sorrows of a human being, and may survive the human being itself.

*Translated by Ivy and  
Tatiana Litvinov*

# Fyodor Dostoyevsky

## THE LITTLE HERO



*(FROM ANONYMOUS MEMOIRS)*

2 was not quite eleven at the time. My parents accepted an invitation for me to spend the month of July with Mr. T., a relative of ours, at his country house near Moscow, where he had some fifty guests staying with him, or maybe more... I don't remember, I didn't count them. It was noisy and gay. A festivity that had been started seemed never to end. It appeared too that our host had promised himself to squander his whole immense fortune as quickly as possible, and in fact he succeeded in keeping this promise a little while ago, that is, he squandered everything he had, completely and utterly, to the very last scrap. Guests kept coming in a continuous stream, for Moscow was but a stone's throw away, in sight practically, and so departing guests only made way for new arrivals, and the festivities went on. One form of amusement followed another, and the variety of entertainments seemed inexhaustible. There was a riding party in the country or walks along the river or to the woods; picnics, lunches in the open; dinners on the large terrace, precious flowers arranged in rows upon it flooding the freshness of the night with their fragrance, brilliant lighting which made our ladies, very pretty almost every one of them, appear lovelier still, their eyes sparkling, their

faces radiant with the pleasurable impressions of the day, their vivacious cross-fire of conversation mingling with silvery peals of laughter. There was dancing, music, and singing; or if the sky was overcast, they had theatricals and tableaux vivants, charades, and games of proverbs, or were entertained by the wits, rhetoricians and story-tellers from among the guests.

And now I came to distinguish several figures who stood out in sharp relief. Slander and gossip went on as usual, of course, for without it the universe would topple and millions of ladies and gentlemen would perish from boredom like flies. But being only eleven, I did not take much notice of these ladies and gentlemen, occupied as I was with entirely different matters, and even if I did notice something it was not all. I did recall some of the things afterwards, though, child that I was, I could only see the brilliant side of the picture, and I was so struck by this abounding gaiety, glitter, and noise, all this that I had never before seen nor heard, that I felt quite lost during the first few days and my young head was in a whirl.

However, I keep on mentioning that I was eleven, and of course I was a mere child and no more than a child. It never occurred to most of these beautiful ladies fondling me to give a thought to my age yet. But, strangely enough, a sensation I myself did not understand had already taken possession of me: something unfamiliar and as yet unknown was already stirring my heartstrings, something that made my heart burn and palpitate as though it were frightened, and often suffused my face with sudden colour. The various privileges accorded my youth turned me to shame and even grieved me at times. Or then again I would be overwhelmed with something like amazement, and I would go away where no one could see me, as if I felt a need to draw breath and endeavour to remember something, something that I thought I had known very well until then and had suddenly forgotten, but something without which I could neither appear before the others nor even exist.

Or then I would fancy that I was keeping something back from the world, but not for anything, not to anyone would I ever have revealed my secret, because it shamed me, the little man, to tears. Soon I began to feel a sort of loneliness amid the whirl which eddied about me. There were other children there too, but all of them were either much younger or much older than I; and, anyway, I could not concern myself with them. Of course,

nothing would have happened to me had I not been in an exceptional position. In the eyes of all those beautiful ladies I was still the same tiny and indefinite creature they occasionally liked to fondle, and with which they could play as with a little doll. One of them particularly, a charming blonde with the richest and loveliest hair that I have ever seen or ever expect to see, seemed to have vowed never to leave me in peace. I was embarrassed and she was delighted at the merry outbursts of laughter about us, provoked by the daring and whimsical pranks she played on me, which evidently pleased her tremendously. In a girls' boarding school, they would probably have nicknamed her "madcap". She was a miracle of loveliness, and there was something in her beauty that simply thrust itself into your eyes the first time you saw her. And, needless to say, she was not one of those retiring little blondes, white and fluffy, gentle like white mice or like pastors' daughters. She was not tall and was rather plump, but her features were delicate and fine, charmingly etched. There was something in her face that was like a flash of lightning, but then she was altogether like a flame — lively, swift, and light. Her large, wide-open eyes seemed to scatter sparks; they glittered like diamonds, and never would I exchange such blue, sparkling eyes for any black ones, be they blacker than the blackest of Andalusian eyes, and then my blonde lady herself was truly worth that famous brunette whose praises a famous and splendid poet had sung, the one who swore by the whole of Castile, in such superb poetry, that he would be willing to break all his bones if he were only allowed to touch his lady's mantilla with the tip of his finger. Now add to this that *my* beautiful lady was the merriest of all the beauties in the world, with a most whimsical sense of humour, and sprightly like a child in spite of having been married for five years or so. A smile was always upon her lips, fresh with the freshness of a rose at dawn which has just opened its crimson fragrant bud, and was still gleaming with the large cool drops of dew in the first rays of the sun.

I remember they were staging theatricals the day after I arrived. The ballroom was packed, there was not a vacant chair in the room, and as I happened to be late for some reason or other, I was obliged to enjoy the performance standing at the back of the hall. However, the jolly acting drew me closer and closer to the stage and, without noticing it, I made my way to the very first rows, where I finally came to stand leaning on the back

of somebody's chair. It was the chair of my blonde lady, but we did not know each other yet. And then, unwittingly somehow, I found myself gazing in admiration at her wonderfully rounded, seductive shoulders, full and white like milky froth, although at that time it was a matter of complete indifference to me whether I looked at a woman's beautiful shoulders or the bonnet with flame-coloured ribbons that concealed the grey hair of a certain distinguished lady sitting in the front row. Next to my blonde lady sat an overripe old maid, one of those, as I happened to notice afterwards, who invariably nestle as close as they possibly can to young and pretty women, preferably ones who do not shun the attentions of young men. But that's beside the point; what mattered was that this old maid intercepted my gaze, leaned towards her friend and, giggling, whispered something into her ear. Her friend turned round suddenly and her sparkling eyes flashed at me so brightly in the semi-darkness that I, unprepared to meet them, started as though I had been scorched. The beautiful lady smiled.

"Do you like the play?" she asked, looking archly and mockingly into my eyes.

"Yes," I replied, still gazing at her in wonder, which was evidently pleasing to her.

"But why are you standing? You'll be tired, haven't you got a seat?"

"That's the whole point, I haven't," I replied, more concerned with my plight just then than with the beautiful lady's sparkling eyes, and feeling genuinely relieved that I had at last found a kind soul I could tell my troubles to. "I've looked already, but all the chairs are taken," I added, as if I were complaining to her that all the seats were occupied.

"Come here," she suggested eagerly, as swift in all her decisions as in her readiness to act upon any fantastic notion that happened to flash through her frivolous mind. "Come here to me, come and sit on my lap!"

"Your lap?" I repeated, bewildered.

I have already said that the privileges accorded me as a child were beginning to wound and shame me. And the privilege offered me now, mockingly it seemed, was really going too far. Moreover, timid and shy enough by nature, I had lately begun to feel particularly shy of women, and therefore I was thrown into utter confusion by her suggestion.

"Yes, of course! Why don't you want to sit on my lap?" she persisted, chuckling louder and louder until at last she simply

burst out laughing, heaven knows why, at her own idea perhaps, or in her delight that she had embarrassed me so. But that was just what she was after.

I blushed and looked about me in perplexity, seeking a way of escape; but she had forestalled me, somehow managing to catch hold of my hand for the very purpose of preventing my getting away, and, pulling me close to herself, she suddenly, quite unexpectedly and to my greatest amazement, crushed my hand most painfully in her naughty, hot fingers, and began to pinch mine so viciously that I had to muster all my self-control to check a scream, wincing the while in a very silly way. Moreover, I was terribly amazed, puzzled and even horrified to learn that there were such funny and spiteful ladies who said such silly things to little boys, and who pinched them so painfully, heaven knows why and in front of everybody, too. I expect my unhappy face reflected all my bewilderment, for the mischievous lady laughed straight into my eyes like one demented, while she went on pinching and crushing my poor fingers harder and harder. She was beside herself with joy, delighted that she had not missed an opportunity of acting like a madcap, and of confusing and utterly bewildering a poor boy. I was in desperate straits. I was burning with shame, because everyone had turned round to look at us, some in wonder, and others in laughter, instantly realizing that the beautiful lady had played one of her pranks. Besides, I wanted to scream so desperately, because she was wrenching my fingers as though in exasperation for the very reason that I did not scream; and I, like a Spartan, resolved to endure the pain, afraid of creating a commotion with my screams, for if there had been a commotion, I don't know what would have happened to me. At last, in a fit of utter despair, I began to struggle, pulling my hand out of her grasp with all my strength, but my tormentor was much stronger than I was. Finally, unable to stand it any longer, I cried out — that was just what she was waiting for! In a flash she released my hand and turned away as if nothing had occurred, as if it was not her but someone else's doing, well, exactly like a schoolboy who gets into mischief the minute the teacher's back is turned, pinching some tiny, weak little boy, giving him a fillip or a kick, jerking his elbow, and in a twinkling turning round again, straightening up and plunging into his lesson, engrossed in his book, thus leaving the irate teacher, swooping down upon the scuffle like a hawk, quite unexpectedly and completely fooled.

But fortunately for me, at that moment everyone's attention was

captivated by the splendid acting of our host, who had the leading part in the play, one of Scribe's comedies. Applause broke out; I took my chance and slipped into the aisle, ran to the very back of the hall to the opposite corner and, hiding behind a pillar, stared in horror in the direction of my treacherous lady's chair. She was still laughing, pressing a handkerchief to her lips. She kept glancing over her shoulder, searching for me in every corner with her eyes, probably feeling disappointed that our silly scuffle was over so soon, and thinking up some new bit of mischief.

This was how we first became acquainted, and from that evening on she never gave me a moment's peace. She victimized me without shame or measure, she became my persecutor, my tormentor. What made the pranks she played on me so amusing was that she had declared herself to be head over heels in love with me, and she teased me in front of everyone. And, of course, perfect savage that I was, I felt grieved and hurt to tears by all this, my plight becoming so dire at times that I would have gladly fought it out with my treacherous "adorer". My naive embarrassment, my desperate anguish seemed to inspire her to persecute me to the end. She knew no pity, and I knew not where to hide from her. The laughter which broke out about us, and which she certainly was good at provoking, only incited her to fresh mischief. But her audience at last began to think that her jokes were being carried too far. And indeed, when I come to think of it now, she did take too many liberties with a child of my age.

But such was her nature: she was a perfect pattern of a spoiled child. I later heard that the person who had spoiled her more than anyone else was her own husband, a very plump, very short, and very red-faced little man, very wealthy and very business-like, by appearance at least, for he fussed and bustled about, and could not bear to remain in the same spot for more than a couple of hours. He used to travel to Moscow every day, sometimes even twice a day, and always on business, as he himself asserted. You could hardly have found a face more good-natured and jolly than his comic and yet at all times honest one. He not only loved his wife to the point of weakness and pathos, he simply worshipped her like an idol.

He did not restrict her in anything. She had a great number of friends of both sexes. First of all because she was well liked by most people, and secondly, because the flighty lady herself was not too particular in her choice of friends although, fundamentally, she was much more serious-minded than could be assumed from what I have just



related about her. But among all her friends there was one young lady whom she set apart and cared for most, a distant relative of hers, who was also among the house guests now. Their friendship was tender and subtle, one of those ties which are sometimes formed between two persons whose natures are often totally contrasting, when one of the two is stricter, deeper and purer, while the other, conscious of her friend's superiority, obeys her lovingly with gallant humility and a noble feeling of self-appraisal, and clasps this friendship to her heart the way one clasps one's happiness. And then the two become linked by bonds of tenderness and noble subtlety: love and complete understanding on the one side, love and esteem on the other, esteem bordering on fear, on fear of lowering herself in the eyes of the one she values so dearly, on a jealous, avid desire to approach that heart closer and closer with every step made in life. The two friends were of the same age, but they were utterly different from each other in every respect, beginning with their beauty. Mme M. was very good looking too, but there was something individual in her beauty, setting her distinctly apart from the crowd of pretty women. There was something in her face that instantly and irresistibly attracted everyone or, rather, inspired those who met her to a noble and lofty regard for her. There are such fortunate faces. When close to her, one felt better somehow, warmer, and more lighthearted, and yet her large wistful eyes, full of fire and strength, had a timid and uneasy look in them, as though she were constantly being threatened with something hostile and sinister, and this strange timidity at times overshadowed her sweet, gentle countenance, reminiscent of the pure faces of the Italian Madonnas, with such deep melancholy that, looking at her, you came to share the sadness as though it were your own personal grief. The earlier, childishly clear countenance still peeped so often through the immaculate beauty of the perfect and regular features and the despondent severity of the deep, unspoken sadness in this pale, drawn face; and this countenance of but recent trusting youth and perhaps artless happiness, the gentle smile, timid and wavering — all of it overwhelmed one with such an inexplicable feeling of compassion for this woman, that in the hearts of one and all a sweet and ardent solicitude was spontaneously kindled, which made you her champion and endeared her to you before you had really come to know her. But the beautiful lady seemed reticent and secretive, whereas, to be sure, there was not a being more solicitous or affectionate whenever someone was in need of sympathy. There are women like that, born sisters of charity in this world. One need not conceal anything from them,

at least none of the pain or the wound in one's soul. If you are in torment, go to them bravely and hopefully, and do not be afraid of being a burden to them, for it is not for us to fathom the depths of infinitely patient love, compassion, and forgiveness in the hearts of some women. A wealth of kindness, consolation, and hope is treasured in these pure hearts, which are so often wounded too, for a heart that loves much, grieves much, but the wound is carefully concealed from curious eyes, because deep-felt sorrow is mostly borne in silence and a secret. They will not shrink from the deepness of your wound, from its pus or its stench; whoever approaches them becomes worthy of them, for they seem to be born for heroism... Mme M. was tall, supple and shapely, but somewhat thin. All her movements were uneven, slow one moment, graceful and rather sedate, or childishly impulsive the next, but at the same time there was something humbly submissive in them, something tremulous and unprotected, but with neither asked nor sought protection from anyone.

I have already said that the treacherous blonde lady's unworthy attitude shamed me, stung and wounded me to the quick. But there was another reason for this now, a secret, strange, and stupid reason which I concealed and guarded like a miser, the very thought of which, when alone with my reeling senses in some dark, secret corner which no mocking, inquisitorial blue eyes could penetrate, smothered me with embarrassment, shame and fear — in a word, I was in love, that is, I suppose I'm talking rubbish, it could not have been that. But then why was my attention caught by just one face alone from all those about me? Why was I so fond of following her with my eyes, although at that time I was quite definitely uninterested in ladies and their friendship? This feeling usually took possession of me in the evenings, when miserable weather drove everyone indoors and I, quietly sitting alone in a far corner of the ballroom, gazed about me aimlessly, unable to find any other pastime at all, for apart from my persecutors, was seldom spoken to, and I felt unbearably bored on such evenings. And then I would peer at the faces in the room, I would listen hard to their conversation, of which I understood nothing more often than not, and it was at moments like these that my spellbound attention was caught, heaven knows why, by the soft glances, gentle smile and lovely face of Mme M. (for it was she), and I would be obsessed by this strange, indefinite, and infinitely sweet sensation. I often gazed at her for hours at a time, I seemed unable to tear my eyes away from her; I learned her every gesture, every movement, my hearing knew each

vibration of the rich, silvery but somewhat muffled voice; it's strange, though, that the timid and sweet impression I gathered from my observations of her was mingled with an inexplicable feeling of curiosity. It was as if I were delving into some mystery...

Taunts aimed at me in the presence of Mme M. tormented me more than anything. To my mind, these railleries and this clownish persecution were really too mortifying. And occasionally, when I was the object of bursts of concerted laughter in which even Mme M. herself could not help but join, I'd be driven to desperation and, beside myself with anguish, I would break away from my tormentors and run away upstairs, and shun everyone for the rest of the day, dreading to appear in the ballroom again. However, I did not fully understand either my shame or my agitation at the time: I went through the whole process unconsciously. I had hardly spoken to Mme M. yet, and, of course, I would never have ventured to. And then, one evening, after a very wretched day, as I was making my way home through the garden alone, having lagged behind the others because I felt tired, I came upon Mme M. sitting on a bench in one of the secluded walks. She sat absently fingering her handkerchief, her head drooping low, all alone, as if she had purposely chosen this isolated spot. She was so lost in thought that she did not hear me coming up to her.

She quickly rose from the bench and turned away when she saw me, but I noticed that she was hurriedly wiping her eyes with her handkerchief. She had been crying. When her eyes were dry she smiled at me and we walked home together. I cannot recall what we talked about, but I remember that she kept sending me away on any pretext she could think of: it was either a flower she wanted me to pick for her, or I had to go and see if there was anyone riding along another path near by. And as soon as I was gone, she instantly brought her handkerchief up to her eyes again, and wiped away her stubborn tears, which simply refused to be driven away, which welled up again and again in her heart and poured out of her poor eyes. I realized she must be finding my company very irksome, since she kept sending me away; my heart bled for her more than ever because she was unable to pull herself together although she saw that I had noticed everything. I was desperately angry with myself, I cursed myself for my awkwardness and lack of resourcefulness, and yet I did not know how best to leave her without showing that I had noticed her grief. And so I walked on beside her in sad bewilderment and even fright, utterly confused and quite incapable of finding anything to say to keep up our conversation, desultory as it was.

I was so struck by this encounter that for the remainder of the evening I stealthily watched Mme M. with avid curiosity, never taking my eyes off her for a minute. But it happened that twice her glance caught me unawares, lost in contemplation, and when she looked at me for the second time, she smiled. This was the only time she did, the whole evening through. Her face, very pale now, had not yet lost its sadness. He sat talking quietly to an elderly lady, a spiteful and shrewish old woman whom everyone disliked for her spying and her gossiping, but whom everyone feared as well, thus being compelled to fawn upon her, willy-nilly.

Mme M.'s husband arrived at about ten. I had been watching her very closely all this time, my eyes fixed on her sorrowful face, and now I saw her start at her husband's unexpected entrance, and her already pale face suddenly turned whiter still. It was so noticeable that others saw it too; I could hear snatches of conversation drifting to me, from which I managed to make out that Mme M. was not quite happy. It was said that her husband was as jealous as a Moor, not from love for her but because of his *amour propre*. In the first place he was a European, a modern man, with a smattering of new ideas and vainly boastful of them. In appearance he was a tall, black-haired and very thick-set man, with European sideburns, a self-complacent, jolly face, white teeth, and the bearing of a perfect gentleman. He was called a *clever man*. In certain societies this is what they call a particular breed of men who have waxed fat at the expense of mankind, who do nothing at all, who want to do nothing at all, and who because of their everlasting laziness and idleness have a lump of fat instead of a heart. And they are the ones who keep saying that there is nothing for them to do because of some very involved, hostile circumstances, which are "weighing down their spirit", and that why they are a "sore sight". That's just a set, pompous saying they have, their *mot d'ordre*, their password and motto, a saying which these smug fatties scatter about them all the time, and which has long since begun to wear thin, being an outright affectation and an empty sound. However, some of these amusing people who simply cannot find anything to do which, by the way, they have never tried to find, are indeed set on having everyone believe that it's not a lump of fat they have in place of a heart but, rather the opposite, something *very deep*, so to say, but what it is exactly the most eminent of surgeons could not have said, out of sheer politeness, of course. The way these gentlemen get on in life is by directing all their instincts and employing all their faculties in gross scoffing and the most short-sighted censoring,

and in maintaining their attitude of immeasurable arrogance. Since they have nothing else to do but make notes of other people's faults and frailties, and since their fair-mindedness amounts to precisely as much as is meted out to an oyster, they are not hard put to it, armed with this means of self-protection, to live rather circumspectly in this world. They are exceedingly vainglorious about it. For instance, they are quite convinced that they are entitled to revenue from the whole world; the world to them is like that extra helping of oysters which they take in case they may want it later; they firmly believe that everyone else is a fool; that everyone is like an orange or a sponge which they can squeeze out now and again whenever they need the juice; that they own the world and that all this praiseworthy order of things exists simply because they are such clever and strong-minded people. In their unlimited arrogance they admit of no shortcomings in themselves. They are not unlike those worldly rogues, born Tartuffes and Falstuffs, who have gone so far in their roguery that they have sincerely come to believe at last that this is the way it should be, that is, that they should live and cheat. They have so long been trying to convince others of their honesty, that finally they themselves have become convinced that they are indeed honest people, and that their very roguery is indeed the honest thing. You could never expect them to venture into conscientious judgement of themselves or honest self-appraisal; they are too bloated with fat for some things. In the foreground, in everything and always, is their own precious self, their Moloch and Baal, their magnificent *ego*. The world, the whole universe is nothing but a splendid mirror for them, created for the express purpose of allowing this little deity to admire himself in it uninterrupted, his own form blocking his view to everyone and everything; and consequently, it's small wonder that everything in the world looks so ugly to him. He has a stock phrase for any occasion and a most fashionable phrase too, which is an exceptionally smart trick of these people. They are really the ones who promote a fashion, idly spreading abroad an idea which their scent tells them will become a success. They have this flair of scenting out one of those fashionable ideas and are the first to adopt it so that it may appear as if they were the ones to conceive it. Their main concern, however, is to provide themselves with a good stock of phrases suitable for the expression of their deep-felt regard for humanity, for the definition of what philanthropy is in its most correct and reasonable form, and, finally, to persecute romanticism unceasingly, or, more often than not, everything that is beautiful and genuine, every atom of which is worth their whole breed of slugs. And in their gross-

ness they fail to recognize the truth in its indirect, transitional and unfinished form; they thrust aside anything that is not yet mature, that has not settled and is still fermenting. The well-fed man has been living a tipsy, carefree life, he has never done a thing himself, and does not know how difficult it is to accomplish anything; God forbid of offending his bloated feelings with some indelicacy; he'll never forgive you for it, he will keep it, will always remember it, and will be delighted to wreak vengeance on you one day. The sum total of all this is that my hero resembled a colossal sack, no more no less, blown out to the full and stuffed with maxims, fashionable phrases, and labels of all sorts and types.

However, I must say that Mr. M. had some individuality too. He was a notable man: he was a wit, a great talker, and a good storyteller, and in the drawing-rooms a circle of listeners invariably formed around him. He was particularly successful in creating an impression that evening. He took control of the conversation; he was in good form, gay and happy over something, and he did, indeed, become the centre of attraction. But all this time, Mme M. seemed listless and unwell; her face was so sad that I kept thinking that in a moment her recent tears would well up again and quiver on her long eyelashes. All this, as I have said, struck me and amazed me exceedingly. I left the room feeling strangely curious, and all night long I dreamed of Mr. M., whereas previous to that I had seldom had nightmares.

Early next morning, I was called to a rehearsal of our tableaux in which I, too, had a part. The tableaux, the play and the ball, all on one evening, were to take place in a matter of five days or so, in honour of the birthday of our host's youngest daughter. Some hundred guests had been invited from Moscow and the neighbouring estates to attend, and as this was almost an impromptu affair, there was a great deal of worry, fuss, and fluster. The rehearsal, or rather the costume inspection, was fixed for an odd hour, in the morning, because our producer, the well-known artist R., a friend and guest, who out of friendship for our host had agreed to take upon himself the composition and production of the tableaux as well as our coaching, was in a hurry to start for town, there to shop for various stage properties and complete all the preparations generally, and therefore there was no time to lose. I was to take part in one of the tableaux with Mme M. It was called "The Mistress of the Castle and Her Page", and depicted a scene from the Middle Ages.

I felt strangely embarrassed when I met Mme M. at the rehearsal. I was afraid she would instantly read in my eyes all the thoughts,

doubts, and surmises conceived in my mind the day before. Moreover, I kept fancying that in a way I was guilty towards her, because I had broken in upon her sorrow and had seen her tears, and that now she could not but regard me unfavourably as an uninvited and undesired partner in her secret. But everything went off quite smoothly, thank God; she simply took no notice of me. She seemed to have no mind for either me or the rehearsal; she was preoccupied, sad, and gloomily pensive; it was evident that some grave anxiety was worrying her. The rehearsal over, I ran upstairs to change, and ten minutes later I was on the verandah on my way into the garden. Mme M. came out through another door almost at the same time, and just then, coming towards us, her self-satisfied spouse appeared, on his way back from the garden where he had escorted a whole group of ladies, leaving them there in the care of one of the idling *cavaliers servant*. The meeting between husband and wife was obviously unexpected. Mme M. was suddenly disconcerted for some unknown reason and there was a hint of annoyance in her impatient gesture. The husband, who had been light-heartedly whistling an aria and thoughtfully stroking and fluffing out his sideburns as he walked, frowned suddenly on seeing his wife, and looked her up and down with a stare that was truly inquisitorial, as I remember it now.

"Off to the garden?" he asked, noting the parasol and the book in his wife's hands.

"No, the grove," she answered, blushing faintly.

"Alone?"

"With him..." Mme M. said, with a nod at me. "I take my morning walks alone," she added in a voice that was somewhat shaky and indistinct, exactly the way one's voice sounds when one is uttering the first lie in one's life.

"Hm... And I've just taken a whole party there. They are all meeting in the flower arbour to see Mr. N. off. He's leaving, you know ... he has some trouble or something in Odessa. Your cousin (he meant the blonde lady) is laughing and almost crying all at once, you can't make her out at all. However, she told me you were angry with Mr. N. and that was why you would not go and see him off. It's nonsense, I trust?"

"She was joking," Mme M. replied as she walked down the verandah steps.

"So that is your daily *cavalier servant*?" asked Mr. M. looking at me through his lorgnette with a crooked smile.

"A page!" I cried, angry because of the lorgnette and the jeer,

and, laughing straight into his face, I bounded down the stairs, taking three steps at a leap.

"Have a good walk," Mr. M. muttered, and went on his way.

Of course, the minute Mme M. had pointed me out to her husband I went up to her and tried to look as if I had been invited a whole hour before and that I had been accompanying her on her morning walks for the last month. But I simply could not understand why she was so upset and taken aback, and what her object was in having recourse to that white lie of hers? Why couldn't she simply say she was going alone? And now, I was afraid to meet her eyes; however, bewildered though I was, I could not help stealing naive little looks into her face; but just as it had been an hour before at the rehearsal, she took notice of neither my glances nor my unspoken questions. The same tormenting anxiety, but deeper and more pronounced, showed in her face, in her agitation, and in her walk. She was hurrying along, quickening her pace more and more, peering uneasily into every path, every clearing in the grove, or glancing back into the garden. And I, too, was expecting something to happen. Suddenly we heard a clatter of hoofs behind us. This was a whole cavalcade of ladies and gentlemen on horseback, who were seeing off that Mr. N. who was leaving our company so abruptly.

My blonde lady was among the amazons, too, the lady Mr. M. had meant when he told us of her tears. But, as usual, she was laughing like a child, riding her fine bay horse at a lively gallop. Mr. N. raised his hat when he came abreast of us, but he neither stopped nor said a word to Mme M. The whole crowd soon disappeared from view. I looked at Mme M. and almost cried out in amazement: she was deadly white, and large teardrops gathered in her eyes. Suddenly, our glances met; Mme M. blushed, turned away for a moment, and there was an unmistakable flicker of vexation and uneasiness in her expression. I was intruding, more so than the day before, that was clear enough, but where could I go?

All at once, as if she had guessed the quandary I was in, Mme M. opened the book she was carrying and blushing, evidently trying to avoid looking at me, she said with feigned surprise:

"Oh dear! This is part two! I took it by mistake; please fetch me the first book, will you?"

What could be clearer? My part was over and I could not have been sent away in a more straightforward manner.



I ran away with her book and did not return. The first part remained untouched on my table all morning...

But I was quite upset; my heart was fluttering as though in constant fright. I did my best to avoid meeting Mme M. But Mr. M.'s smug countenance I watched with a wild sort of curiosity, as if it were sure to display something quite extraordinary now. I really fail to understand why I was so ridiculously curious then, all I remember is that everything I had witnessed that morning left me strangely bewildered. But my day had just begun, and it was to be abundantly eventful for me.

Dinner was served very early. All the guests were to take part in a pleasure outing that evening, a ride to the neighbouring village where a festival was being held, and therefore we had to have the time to get ready. I had been dreaming of this ride for three whole days, anticipating a world of pleasure. Almost everyone was gathered on the terrace for coffee. I stole in after the others and hid behind the triple row of chairs. My curiosity drew me on, and yet I didn't want Mme M. to catch sight of me. But it pleased chance to place me close to my blonde persecutor. A miracle had happened to her, something that was quite inconceivable: she had become twice as beautiful as she had been before! I don't know why it is or how, but miracles such as this do happen to women, and not infrequently too. There was a new guest among us at that time, a tall, pale-faced young man, our blonde lady's inveterate admirer, who had just arrived from Moscow for the express purpose, it seemed, of filling the place vacated by Mr. N., who was rumoured to be desperately in love with our beautiful lady. As for the new arrival, he had for a long time been on exactly the same terms with her as Benedict was with Beatrice in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. To continue, our beautiful lady was at her extraordinary best that day. Her jokes and chatter were so graceful, so candid and naive, and so excusably indiscreet; she was so gracefully presumptuous in that everyone should be delighted with her, that she really did make one and all feel an extraordinary admiration for her. A close circle of amazed and rapt listeners always surrounded her, and never before had she been so enchanting. Her every word was a seduction, a wonder, to be caught up and passed around; and not a single joke or witticism of hers was wasted. No one, it seemed, had ever known her to possess so much taste, brilliance, and cleverness. Ordinarily, all her best qualities were buried beneath the most self-willed whimsy, the most stubborn puerilities, almost bordering on

buffoonery; one rarely noticed them, and if one did, one did not believe in them, and so her unusual success that evening was received with a passionate chorus of amazement.

However, this success was furthered by one peculiar and rather delicate circumstance, at least it was enhanced by the part it befell Mme M.'s husband to play in it. The lovely madcap decided (and it must be added: to everyone's delight, or at least to the delight of all the young people) to stage a violent attack on him, for reasons which were probably very important to her. She started a regular cross-fire of jokes, taunts, sarcastic remarks of the most irresistible and slippery kind, sarcasms of the most treacherous, perfectly secure and smooth type which never miss their mark and which provide no loopholes for a counter-attack, merely wearing out their victims with their hopeless struggles, and driving them to madness and the most amusing despair.

I do not know for certain, but I think that all this escapade was premeditated and not spontaneous. This desperate duel began as early as dinner-time that day. I say "desperate" because Mr. M. did not lay down arms soon. He had to collect all his presence of mind, all his quick-wittedness, all his rare resourcefulness so as not to be utterly defeated and turned to rout in absolute disgrace. All those who took part in or witnessed the fray laughed heartily and incessantly throughout. Today did not resemble yesterday for him at any rate. Mme M. was seen to have made several attempts to restrain her imprudent friend, who for her part was set upon cloaking the jealous husband in the most ridiculous and clownish of guises, in the guise of Blue Beard I should imagine, judging by all the premises and by what I seem to remember, to say nothing of the part which I myself was destined to play in this collision.

It happened suddenly, in the most amusing way, quite unexpectedly, and unfortunately just when I was standing in full view, suspecting no evil intent and even forgetting my recent wariness. Suddenly I was thrust into the foreground as Mr. M.'s mortal enemy and natural rival, as being madly and desperately in love with his wife, to which my tormentor swore without a qualm, giving her word of honour and declaring she had proof of this, for only that afternoon, in the forest, she had seen...

But before she could finish, I broke in and interrupted her at a moment which was most inopportune for me. That moment had been timed so cruelly, the trap laid so treacherously for the very end, for the clownish denouement, and was so immensely funny

in its set up, that a regular outburst of general laughter, quite irrepressible, saluted this latest joke of hers. And though I guessed even then that it was not to my lot that the most unpleasant role had fallen, I nevertheless felt so embarrassed, annoyed and frightened, that overwhelmed with tears of anger and despair, choking with the shame of it, I tore my way through two rows of chairs, stepped forward and, turning to my tormentor, shouted in a voice breaking with sobs and indignation:

"Aren't you ashamed ... out loud too ... in front of all the ladies ... to say such a mean ... lie!! Just like a child ... in front of all the gentlemen ... what will they say?... And you, so big ... and married!.."

My speech was cut short, for deafening applause broke out. My sally created a proper furore. My naive gesture, my tears and most of all the fact that I seemed to have spoken up in Mr. M.'s defence, provoked such infernal laughter, that even now, at the very recollection of it, I cannot help laughing too. I was dumbfounded, almost insane with horror, and, burning with shame, I covered my face with my hands and shot out of the room, knocking a tray out of the hands of a footman I bumped into at the door. I rushed upstairs to my room, pulled out the key sticking on the outside, and locked myself in. That was a good thing because I was being pursued. In less than a minute a whole bevy of our prettiest ladies besieged my door. I could hear their ringing laughter, their rapid conversation, their shrill voices; they all twittered at once like swallows. All of them, every single one of them begged me, implored me to unlock my door if only for a moment; they swore they wouldn't do me the slightest bit of harm, all they wanted to do was smother me with kisses. But ... what could be more horrible than this new threat? I was burning with shame, I hid my face in my pillow, I did not open up, I did not even reply. They went on knocking and beseeching me for a long time, but I was deaf and unresponsive, just like an eleven-year-old.

Well, what was I to do now? All was revealed, all was disclosed, all that I had guarded and secreted so jealously... Everlasting shame and disgrace would fall upon my head! To tell the truth, I myself could not define what it was I was afraid of and what I wanted to conceal, but, after all, I was afraid of that *something*, I was still trembling like a leaf lest that it should be disclosed. Neither did I know until that moment whether that something was good or bad, glorious or disgraceful, praiseworthy or not? And now, in my anguish and enforced loneliness, I learned that it was *ridiculous*

and *shameful*! At the same time my instinct told me that a verdict such as this was faulty, inhuman, and harsh; but I was beaten, destroyed; the process of reasoning seemed to stop and become tangled in my mind; I could neither combat this verdict nor even consider it properly; I was dazed; all I was conscious of was that my heart had been wounded inhumanly and shamelessly, and impotent tears overwhelmed me. I was enraged; hatred and indignation, such as I had never known before, were seething within me, for this was the first real grief, insult, and injury that I had experienced in my life; there is no exaggeration whatsoever in all this, I really felt it all. A child's first, unformed, and inexperienced feeling had been so ruthlessly tampered with, his first sweet and virginal modesty so early stripped and desecrated, his first and, perhaps, very deep aesthetic feeling besmirched. Those who made sport of me did not, of course, know or suspect much of what my suffering involved. A certain secret circumstance which I had not yet analyzed and was somehow afraid to analyze, was to a great extent responsible for my anguish. In sorrow and despair I remained lying on my bed, my face buried in the pillows, I was hot one minute, shivering the next. Two questions tormented me: what had the wretched blonde lady seen and what exactly could she have seen between Mme M. and me in the grove today? And the second one was: how, with what countenance, and in what possible manner could I look into Mme M.'s face now, and not perish that same minute and on the same spot from shame and despair?

At last an unusual noise in the courtyard roused me from the semi-coma I was in. I got up and went to the window. The whole yard was cluttered with carriages, saddle-horses and with servants bustling about. It looked as if everyone were leaving; a few riders were already mounted; the other guests were taking their seats in the carriages... And then I remembered the outing! And now, little by little, uneasiness began to seep into my heart; I peered into the yard trying to see my klepper, but it was not there, and that meant that I had been overlooked. I could not endure it and rushed downstairs, no longer thinking of unpleasant encounters or that recent disgrace of mine.

Thundering news awaited me: on this occasion there was neither a saddle-horse for me nor a seat in any of the carriages; everything had been taken, occupied, and I had no chance of going with the others.

Stunned by this new misfortune, I stood on the porch and gazed

disconsolately at the long row of carriages, cabriolets and barouches in which there was not even the tiniest bit of room for me, and at the smart ladies sitting their impatiently prancing mounts.

One of the riders had tarried for some reason. Everyone was waiting for him in order to start off. His horse stood by the porch, champing the bit, pawing the ground, starting and rearing with fright. Two grooms were holding it carefully by the bridle, while everyone else kept a wary and respectable distance.

Indeed, a most distressing thing had occurred which was preventing me from going. Apart from the fact that new guests had arrived and had taken all the seats and all the horses, two of the saddle-horses had fallen ill, and one of the two was my klepper. But it appeared that I was not the only one to suffer because of this circumstance: our new guest, that pale-faced young man I had already mentioned, had no horse to ride either. To save the situation, our host was obliged to resort to extreme measures, that is to recommend his wild, unbroken stallion, adding, in order to clear himself of any blame beforehand, that it should not be ridden under any circumstances and that it had long been decided to sell it because of its wild temper, if a buyer could be found for it, of course. But the forewarned young man declared that he was a decent rider, and that he was prepared to mount anything at all, so long as he could go. Our host said nothing then, but now I come to think of it there was an ambiguous and cunning smile lurking at the corners of his mouth. While waiting for the rider who had boasted of his skill, our host stood by the horse, rubbing his hands in his impatience and throwing anxious glances at the door. Something akin to his feelings was transmitted to the two grooms, who held back the stallion and almost burst with pride because they stood there, in full view of the whole company, beside a horse like that, which might go and kill a man for no reason at all! Something not unlike their master's smile was reflected in their eyes, too, which were popping in anticipation and were also fastened on the door from which the visiting dare-devil was to appear. And then the horse, too, behaved as though it had reached an understanding with its master and grooms: its behaviour was so arrogant and conceited as if it were conscious of the scores of curious, watching eyes, and were flaunting its disgraceful reputation before everyone, in precisely the same manner in which an incorrigible rake takes pride in his criminal escapades. It seemed the horse was

challenging any dare-devil who ventured to encroach upon its independence.

This dare-devil appeared at last. Uneasy because he had kept everyone waiting, he hurried down the steps without looking up, hastily pulling on his gloves, and he only raised his eyes when, stretching out his hand to grasp the withers, he was startled at the sudden mad leap of the rearing horse and the warning shouts of the frightened company. The young man stepped back and looked in astonishment at the wild horse, which trembled like a leaf, snorted with rage and rolled its bloodshot eyes wildly, sank back on its hind legs and raised its front ones as if it were about to tear off and carry the grooms away with it. For a minute or two the young man stood in utter bewilderment; then, reddening slightly for his moment of perplexity, he raised his eyes, glanced about him and looked at the frightened ladies.

"It's a very good horse," he uttered as though to himself, "and, by the look of it, it must be very pleasant to ride, but ... but d'you know, I'm not going to," he concluded, addressing our host with his wide, frank smile which so well became his kind and clever face.

"But I still consider you a splendid rider, I swear I do," replied the overjoyed master of the unapproachable horse, giving his guest a warm and even a grateful handshake, "and for the very reason that you have at once realized what sort of a beast you are dealing with." He then added with dignity, "Would you believe it that I, who had served in the Hussars for twenty-three years, have thrice had the pleasure of lying on the ground, thanks to it, in other words, the exact number of times I have mounted this ... this good-for-nothing. No, Tankred my friend, there are no people of the right kidney for you here; evidently your rider is some Ilya Muromets,\* no less, who's sitting in his Karacharovo village, waiting until you lose all your teeth! Here, take it away! It's just frightening everyone! We shouldn't have led it out at all!" he concluded, rubbing his hands complacently.

It must be mentioned that Tankred was not the slightest bit of use to him, it wasn't worth its keep; moreover, the old Hussar had wrecked all his former glory of a remount officer through it by paying a fabulous sum for the useless drone whose only redeeming feature was its beauty perhaps... But notwithstanding, he was delighted that his Tankred had not lost its dignity and had

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\* A legendary Russian hero.— *Ed.*

disconcerted one more rider, thus reaping fresh and pointless laurels for itself.

"Oh! Aren't you coming?" cried the blonde lady, who particularly wanted her *cavalier servant* to be beside her on this occasion. "Can it be that you are afraid?"

"I am, honestly," replied the young man.

"Are you quite serious?"

"But do you really want me to break my neck?"

"Then hurry and change to my horse; don't be afraid, it's most docile, we won't be keeping anyone, they'll switch the saddles over at once! I'll try and ride yours, it cannot be that Tankred is always so discourteous!"

No sooner said than done! She jumped down from her saddle and was beside us before she had finished her sentence.

"Little you know Tankred if you imagine it'll allow itself to be saddled with your rotten saddle! And then I shan't let you go and break your neck; it really would be a pity, you know!" said our host, exaggerating as usual in this moment of inward satisfaction his already exaggerated and studied abrasiveness and even rudeness of speech which, he believed, were a commendation of a good soul and an old soldier, and should appeal to the ladies particularly. It was one of his fancies, his favourite hobbyhorse, well known to us all.

"I say, cry-baby, wouldn't you like to have a try? You were so anxious to go," said the courageous lady on noticing me there, and she teasingly indicated Tankred — prompted chiefly by her desire not to go away empty-handed since she had dismounted unnecessarily, and not to pass me by without a stinging little taunt, since I myself had blundered into her line of vision.

"I expect you're not like ... oh well, it goes without saying that you're a well-known hero and would think cowardice shameful, especially now when you are watched, you, lovely page," she added with a rapid glance at Mme M., whose carriage stood nearest to the porch.

Hatred and a desire for revenge had flooded my heart when the beautiful amazon came up to us with the intention of mounting Tankred... But I cannot describe what I felt at this unexpected and puerile challenge. Everything seemed to swim before my eyes when I intercepted her look at Mmè M. Instantly an idea flared up in my mind ... it was indeed an instant, less than an instant, it was like a blast of gunpowder, or perhaps my cup had overflowed

and all my resurrected spirit revolted in me with such violence that suddenly I wanted to strike all my foes down dead and take revenge on them for everything and in front of everyone, thus showing them the sort of man I was; or perhaps, by some miracle, someone enlightened me in that instant in the history of the Middle Ages, which I knew not a word up till then, and a whirl of tournaments, paladins, heroes, fair ladies, glory and victors flitted through my spinning head, followed by the sound of heralds' trumpets, clashing swords, shouting, cheering crowds, and amid all these shouts one timid cry of a frightened heart, which is sweeter balm to a proud spirit than victory and glory. I do not know if all that foolishness had really occurred to me or, better said, a presentiment of that approaching and unavoidable foolishness, but all I do know is that I heard my hour strike. My heart turned over, faltered, and in one bound I jumped down from the porch and found myself beside Tankred.

"And you thought I'd be afraid?" I cried impudently and proudly, my vision dimming with my passion, breathless with excitement and blushing so that tears scorched my cheeks. "There, you'll see!" And, grasping Tankred by the withers, I put my foot into the stirrup before I could think, before the others could make the slightest move to hold me back; and in that instant, Tankred reared up, flung it head, with one mighty jump tore free from the dumbfounded grooms, and flew away like the wind. Everyone just gasped and screamed.

Heaven alone knows how I managed to swing my other leg over at this furious pace; neither do I understand how on earth I did not lose the reins. Tankred carried me out through the grillwork gate, turned sharply to the right, and tore away along the railings, not knowing where or how it was going. And only then did I hear behind me the shout raised by fifty voices, and this shout echoed in my tremulous heart with such a feeling of contentment and pride that I shall never forget that crazy moment of my childhood. All the blood rushed to my head, deafening and flooding me, and drowning my fear. I was beside myself. And truly, as I remember it now, there really seemed to be something knightly in all this.

However, all my knightliness began and ended in less than a second, for if it hadn't the knight would have come to grief. And even so, I do not know what saved me. I could ride, of course, I had been taught, but my klepper was more like a lamb than a saddle-horse. Naturally, I would have tumbled from Tankred's back if it had only



had the time to throw me; but having galloped some fifty yards, it suddenly took fright at a huge stone lying by the roadside, and shied backwards. It swerved in full flight with a turn so headlong and abrupt, that it puzzles me to this day why wasn't I bounced out of my saddle like a ball to some twenty feet away and been dashed to pieces, and how Tankred did not dislocate its shoulder from this sharp swerve? It tore back towards the gate, jerking its head furiously, glaring wildly to right and left, as if drunk with madness, flinging its legs up haphazardly, trying to shake me off with every leap as if it were a tiger that had jumped on to its back and sunk its claws and teeth into its flesh. Another moment and I would have been off, I was already falling; but now several riders came flying to my rescue. Two of them cut off the way into the open country; two others galloped so close they almost crushed my legs, as they hemmed Tankred in with their horses' flanks. They had the reins in their hands. A few moments later we were at the front porch.

I was pale and almost fainting when they took me down from my saddle. I was trembling all over like a blade of grass in the wind, and so was Tankred, which stood motionless, straining its whole body backwards as though digging its hoofs into the ground, its fiery breath coming laboriously from its red, steaming nostrils, quivering like a leaf and stunned, it seemed, by the insult and by its rage at the unpunished impudence of a child. All about me I heard exclamations of alarm, amazement and fright.

Just then my wandering gaze met that of Mme M., who was upset and pale, and — and I cannot forget that one moment — colour instantly suffused the whole of my face, it flamed up and burned like fire; I don't know what was happening to me but, embarrassed and frightened by my own feelings, I shyly dropped my eyes. However, my look had been noticed, intercepted, and stolen from me. All eyes were turned to Mme M., who, caught unawares by this general interest, suddenly blushed like a child from some involuntary and naive feeling, and forced herself to try and cover her blush with a laugh, quite unsuccessfully though, it must be said.

All this must have been a most amusing spectacle, of course; but suddenly a very silly and unexpected gesture saved me from being a laughing stock, and gave this whole adventure a peculiar tinge. The one who was to blame for all this commotion, the one who had until then been my irreconcilable enemy, my beautiful tormentor, suddenly rushed to me and began to kiss and hug me. She had not believed her

own eyes when she saw me dare to accept her challenge and take up the gauntlet she had thrown me by glancing at Mme M. She had almost died with remorse and fright for me when I was flying astride Tankred; but now, when everything was over, and especially when she, together with the others, had caught the glance I gave Mme M., had seen my confusion and my sudden blush, when her romantically inclined and frivolous mind had at last succeeded in placing a new, mysterious and unspoken interpretation on that one moment — now, after all this, my “knightliness” so enraptured her that she rushed to me and pressed me to her bosom — moved, delighted, and proud of me. A minute later she looked up at all the people crowding around us both, and they saw the most candid, the most stern of faces, with two little crystal-clear tear-drops quivering and gleaming in her eyes, and they heard her say in a serious and grave voice they had never heard her use before: “*Mais c’est très sérieux, messieurs, ne riez pas!*” nodding at me and indifferent to the fact that everyone was standing before her spellbound, lost in admiration of her rapturous delight. This spontaneous and quick impulse, this serious face, this simple-hearted naiveté, these never yet suspected heart-felt tears welling up in her ever laughing eyes, were a miracle so unexpected in her, that all stood before her as though electrified by her look, her quick fiery words and her gesture. It seemed no one could tear their eyes away from her, afraid to miss this rare play of feeling on her inspired face. Even our host turned red like a tulip and it is said that he was afterwards heard to confess that “to his shame” he was in love with his beautiful guest for almost a whole minute after this. Well, needless to say, that after all that I was, of course, a knight and a hero.

“Delorges! Toggenburg!” I heard about me.

Applause broke out.

“Good for the younger generation!” said our host.

“But he’s coming with us, he must certainly come with us!” cried the beautiful lady. “We shall, we must find him a seat. He’ll sit next to me, on my knees ... or no, no! I didn’t mean it!...” she amended, laughing and unable to restrain her mirth as she remembered our first encounter. But though she laughed, she tenderly patted my hand and showered caresses on me, so I should not feel hurt.

“Of course! Of course!” several voices caught up. “He must come, he has won a seat for himself!”

The matter was solved in a minute. The old maid who had first introduced me to the blonde lady, was instantly overwhelmed

with requests by all the young people to remain behind and let me take her place in the carriage, to which she was obliged to agree, to her great disappointment, while she smiled and hissed quietly with rage. Her patroness, the lady she was always hovering around, my old enemy and new friend, called out to her, as she galloped away on her mettlesome horse laughing like a child, that she envied her and would have gladly stayed behind with her because it was going to rain anyway and we would all be soaked through.

Her prophecy of rain came true indeed. A regular downpour started an hour later, and our outing was ruined. We had to take shelter in the peasants' huts and remain there for several hours, and we could not start back for home until after nine, in the dampness that follows rain. I had the beginnings of a chill. Just as we were about to take our seats and start off, Mme M. came up to me and was surprised to find me wearing nothing warmer than a jacket with an open collar. I told her I had not had the time to fetch a raincoat. She pinned and fastened the frilled collar of my shirt higher up, then she took off a crimson gauze scarf she was wearing, and wound it round my neck, so I should not get a sore throat. She was in such a hurry that I did not even manage to thank her.

When we got home, however, I went in search of her and found her in a small sitting-room, together with my blonde lady and the pale-faced young man who had that day achieved the renown of a good horseman by being afraid to mount Tankred. I went up to her to express my thanks and to return the scarf. But now, with all my adventures over, I seemed to be ashamed of something; I wanted to go upstairs as soon as possible and there, at leisure, think something over and puzzle it out. My mind was crammed with impressions. As I proffered the scarf I blushed all over, of course.

"I'd lay a wager he would have liked to keep the scarf," the young man said with a smile, "you can see it in his eyes that he's sorry to part with it!"

"That's it! That's just it!" the blonde lady put in. "Dear, oh dear!" she said, shaking her head in annoyance, but she stopped because of a grave look from Mme M. who did not want the joke to be carried further.

I hurried away.

"Oh, you silly!" the blonde lady began as she caught up with me in the next room and took both my hands in a friendly clasp, "if you were so keen on keeping the scarf, you shouldn't have returned it at all! You could have said you had put it somewhere and that would have been

the end of it. Oh you! Couldn't even do a thing like that! What a funny boy you are!"

And then she gave my chin a light flip of her finger, laughing because I turned red like a poppy.

"I am your friend now, you know — isn't it so? Is our enmity over? Eh? Yes or no?"

I laughed and pressed her fingers in silence.

"Well, mind it now!.. But why are you so pale and shivery? Have you caught a chill?"

"Yes, I'm unwell."

"Oh you poor dear! It's been too much of a day for you! D'you know what? Don't wait for supper, go to bed now, you'll be all right by morning. Come along!"

She took me upstairs and it seemed there would be no end to the fuss she made over me. While I was taking off my clothes and getting into bed, she ran downstairs, got me some tea, and brought it up herself. She then went and fetched a warm blanket for me. I was quite amazed and moved by all her solicitude and care for me, or perhaps I was so affected by the events of that day, the outing and my chill, that when I bade her good-night, I hugged her warmly and tightly as if she were my sweetest and dearest friend, and then all my feelings swept over my enfeebled heart all at once, and I almost wept, clinging to her breast. She saw how impressionable I was and I believe my naughty friend herself was moved a little.

"You're a very good boy," she whispered, looking at me softly, "now please don't be angry with me, you won't be, eh?"

In short, we became the truest, the tenderest of friends.

It was rather early when I awoke, but the sun was already flooding my room with a brilliant light. I jumped out of bed feeling perfectly well and strong, with no trace of my chill and filled instead with an inexplicable gladness. I remembered what had happened the night before, and felt that I'd gladly give up a whole fortune if only I could embrace my new friend, our beautiful blonde lady, this very minute again; but it was still very early and everyone was asleep. I dressed hurriedly, went down into the garden and thence into the wood. I made my way to where the growth was thickest, where the trees smelt strongest of resin, where the sun's rays peeped most gaily, rejoicing that here and there they had pierced the shady denseness of the leaves. The morning was beautiful.

I wandered on and on, and before I knew it I had reached the edge of the wood and had come out above the Moskva River. It

was some two hundred yards away, below the hill. Men were mowing on the opposite bank of the river. Entranced, I watched the rows of sharp-edged scythes flash in the sun with one accord as the men swung, and then, streaking like little tongues of fire, vanish again — suddenly hiding; I watched the grass, cut at the roots, fall to right and left in rich piles and form into long, straight rows. I do not know how long I stood thus lost in contemplation, but suddenly I was arrested by the sound of a horse snorting and stamping and pawing the ground impatiently some twenty yards away from me, in a clearing running from the highroad to the manor house. I don't know if I only heard it just then when the rider came up and stopped, or if I had been hearing his approach for some time but the sounds had been tickling my hearing in vain, impotent to tear me away from my reverie. Curious, I turned back into the wood, and when I had made but a few steps I heard voices talking rapidly but softly. I went closer still, cautiously parted the branches of a bush edging the clearing, and instantly sprang back in amazement: a white dress I well knew flitted before my eyes, and a woman's soft voice echoed in my heart like a melody. It was Mme M. She was standing close to the rider, who was saying something hurriedly to her without dismounting from his horse, and to my surprise I saw it was Mr. N., the young man who had left the previous morning and whom Mr. M. had been so anxious to see off. But it was said at the time that he was going very far away, to the south of Russia somewhere, and therefore I was very much surprised to see him with us again so soon and alone with Mme M. She was eager and excited as I had never before seen her, and tears were glistening on her cheeks. The young man was holding her hand, and he kissed it as he leaned down from his saddle. It was their minute of parting that I had come upon. They seemed to be in a hurry. At last he drew a sealed envelope from his pocket, gave it to Mme M., embraced her with one arm, leaning down from his saddle as before, and then he kissed her long and warmly. The next moment, he whipped his horse and flew past me like an arrow. Mme M. gazed after him for a few seconds, then she turned homewards, pensively and sadly. However, when she had gone a little way down the clearing she suddenly seemed to recollect her thoughts and, parting the bushes, she entered the wood.

I followed her, stirred and bewildered by all that I had witnessed. My heart was beating hard, as with fright. I felt dazed and benumbed; my thoughts were scattered and vague; all I recall is that something was making me dreadfully sad. I caught glimpses of her

white dress through the bushes in front of me now and again. I followed her without thinking, keeping her in sight, but tremulous lest she should see me. At last she turned on to a path that led towards the garden. I waited a moment or two and then I came out into the open as well; but great was my astonishment when suddenly I saw the sealed envelope, which I recognized at once, lying on the reddish sand, the envelope which but ten minutes before had been given to Mme M.

I picked it up: it was a white envelope, without a word written on it, it was not large but bulky and heavy, as if there were two or three sheets of notepaper in it.

What was in this envelope? No doubt it held the key to all this mystery. Perhaps in it was said all that Mr. N. feared would be left unsaid at that hurried and fleeting rendezvous? He had not even dismounted. Was he pressed for time, or was he afraid, perhaps, of betraying himself in that moment of parting... God alone knows.

I paused among the trees and threw the envelope into the very middle of the path, keeping my eyes fixed on it meanwhile, thinking that Mme M., discovering her loss, would retrace her steps to look for it. After some four minutes of waiting, I could contain myself no longer and, picking up the envelope again, I put it in my pocket and ran after Mme M. I only caught up with her in the garden; she was walking straight towards the house along the main avenue, lost in thought with eyes downcast, although her steps were swift and hurried. I did not know how I was to act. Should I go up to her and give her the envelope? But that would mean that I knew everything, that I had seen everything. I would have betrayed myself with the first word I uttered. And how was I to look at her now? How would she look at me? I kept hoping that she would remember, would miss the envelope and retrace her steps. In that case I could have dropped the envelope on the path, and she would have found it. But no! We were close to the house now; she had already been seen.

As ill luck would have it, almost everyone was up very early that morning, for it had been decided the previous night, after the unsuccessful outing, to make another start that day, which I knew nothing about. Everyone was on the terrace having breakfast, ready to set out. I waited for ten minutes or so to avoid being seen with Mme M. and, taking a roundabout way through the garden, approached the house from the opposite direction, much later than Mme M. She was walking up and down the terrace, looking pale and upset, her arms folded,

and it was obvious that she was making a valiant effort to master her tormenting, desperate anguish, which could be read in her eyes, her pacing, and her every movement. Once or twice she went down the terrace steps and started towards the garden, and all the while her eyes searched impatiently, hungrily, and even indiscreetly for something on the terrace floor and between the flower beds. There was no doubt about it: she had discovered her loss and was evidently afraid she had dropped the envelope here somewhere, close to the house — yes, it must have been there, and she knew it!

Someone remarked that she was looking pale and upset, and then the others noticed it too. A regular volley of questions and exclamations followed; she had to put them off with a joke, to laugh, and to appear light-hearted. Now and again she threw a glance at her husband, who was engaged in conversation with two ladies at the other end of the terrace, and then the same tremulousness and embarrassment seized her as on the first night of his arrival. I stood apart from everyone, my hand thrust into my pocket, clutching the envelope, and I prayed to God that Mme M. would take notice of me. I wanted to give her heart, to calm her fears if only with a look, or to say something to her covertly and quickly. But when she did happen to look at me, I started and dropped my eyes.

I saw her anguish and I had not misunderstood its cause. I do not know her secret to this day. I know nothing but what I myself had witnessed and what I am telling now. Perhaps this affair was not what it could have been supposed at a mere glance. Perhaps that kiss had been a parting one, perhaps it was the poor and crowning reward for all that had been sacrificed to her good name and her peace of mind. Mr. N. was going away; perhaps he was leaving her for ever. And then the letter itself, which I was clutching in my hand — who knows what it said? How judge her and who should be the judges? And yet there was no doubt at all, that the sudden disclosure of this secret would have dealt a frightening, shattering blow to her life. My memory still retains her face: one could not have suffered more. To feel, to know, to be certain, that in a quarter of an hour's time, or in a minute, everything might be disclosed, to wait for it as one condemned to death waits for the hour of execution; someone might have found the envelope and picked it up; there was no name on it, it might have been ripped open, and then ... what then? Was there a means of execution more horrible than that awaiting her? She was moving among those who would sit in judgement over her. Their flatteringly smiling faces would in a minute turn grim and inexorable. She would read mockery,

malice, and icy disdain in these faces, and then night, eternal and dawnless, would descend upon her world. But no, I could not have then understood all this the way I am thinking of it now. All I felt then were my suspicions and my misgivings, and a pain in my heart because of the danger threatening her, which I did not even quite understand. But whatever her secret involved, much of it was atoned for, if there was anything that needed atonement, by those grief-laden moments of which I was a witness and which I shall never forget.

But now a cheerful voice was heard summoning everyone to get started; a happy bustle ensued; everyone broke into talk and merry laughter. In a minute or two the terrace was deserted. Mme M. excused herself from going, admitting at last that she was unwell. But, thank goodness, everyone was leaving, everyone was hurrying away and they had no time to pester her with their sympathy, their questions, and their advice. Only a few of the guests remained at home. Her husband said something to her; she replied that she would be well by evening, that he need not be anxious, that she felt no need to lie down, that she would go into the garden, alone ... with me... And, saying this, she looked at me. What could be more opportune! I flushed with happiness! In a minute we were on our way.

She was following the same alleys, walks, and paths she had come through earlier that morning on her way from the wood, her instinct prompting her to pick out the same way. She stared fixedly before her, her eyes fastened on the ground, searching it; she ignored my questions and perhaps she forgot that I was walking with her.

But when we finally reached the spot where I had picked up the envelope and where the path came to an end, Mme M. suddenly stopped and said in a feeble, stricken voice, that she was feeling worse and would return home. When she got to the grille of the garden wall, she stopped again and stood thinking a moment. A smile of desperation twitched her lips and then, exhausted, wearied, with reckless resolution and submitting to her fate, she started towards the wood again, this time quite forgetful of my presence.

My heart was wrung with anguish, and yet I did not know what to do.

We went on, or rather I led her on to the spot where an hour ago I had heard the stamping of his horse and had listened to their conversation. Here, close to an old elm-tree, there was a seat, cut in solid rock, with ivy twining round it and wild jasmine and sweet-brier growing at the foot. There were little bridges, arbours, grottos and other such surprises scattered all over the small wood. Mme M. sat



down and glanced vacantly at the wonderful view spreading before us. Then she opened her book and fixed her motionless gaze upon it, she neither read nor turned the pages, hardly knowing what she was doing. It was already half past nine. The sun was high in the sky, floating majestically in the fathomless blue above us, melting, it seemed, in its own fire. The haymakers had moved further on; they were barely visible from our side of the river. Endless rows of cut grass were trailing close at their heels, and its warm fragrance came wafting to us on the barely stirring breeze. The creatures that "neither reap nor sow" but are as wilful as the air they cleave with their wings, were loud in a never-ending chorus all about us. It seemed that each flower, the poorest little blade of grass, was offering its sacrificial perfume to the One who had created it, saying, "Father! I am blessed and happy!.."

I glanced at the poor woman who alone seemed dead in this world seething with joyous life; two large tear-drops, which the searing pain had forced from her heart, hung motionless on her eyelashes. I had the power to bring life and happiness to this poor, sinking heart, but I did not know how to begin, how to make the first move. I was in torment. A hundred times I tried to approach her, and every time a strange feeling I could not master nailed me to the spot, and every time my face burning like fire.

Suddenly a happy thought dawned on me: the means was found; I felt restored to life.

"Would you like me to pick you a bouquet of flowers?" I offered in a voice so joyful that Mme M. raised her head at once and looked at me closely.

"Do," she said at last, very faintly, with the smallest of smiles, and instantly looked down at the page again.

"They may cut the grass here too, you know, and there won't be any flowers left!" I cried gaily as I started on my way.

Soon I had my bouquet ready — small and plain. I would have been ashamed to bring it into a room, but how merrily my heart beat while I was picking the flowers and tying the bouquet together. The sweet-brier and wild jasmine I picked before I set out. I knew there was a field of ripening rye near by, and I ran there for some cornflowers. I selected the most golden and fat ears of rye and put them between the flowers. Close by I chanced upon a whole nest of forget-me-nots, and my bouquet was beginning to grow. Further away in the field I found some deep blue bellflowers and pinks, and then I ran down to the river to pick some yellow water-lilies. And then, as I went into the

wood for a minute on my way back, to see if I couldn't get a few bright green, lobed maple leaves to surround the bouquet, I suddenly stumbled upon a whole family of heartseases, and the violet perfume luckily leading me to the discovery of the flower still sprinkled with bright drops of dew and hiding in the thick, lush grass. My bouquet was ready. I wove some long blades of grass into a thin rope and tied it round the bouquet, and then I carefully placed the envelope among the flowers, but in such a way that it could be very easily seen if my gift were granted the slightest bit of attention.

I took it to Mme M.

It occurred to me, on the way, that the letter was much too evident, and so I covered it with the flowers. As I came closer I pushed it deeper into the bouquet and then, when I had almost reached Mme M., I suddenly thrust it so far down that nothing remained to be seen of it at all. My cheeks were blazing. I wanted to hide my face in my hands and run away at once, but the look she gave my flowers said that she had quite forgotten that I had gone to pick them for her. With hardly a glance, she stretched out her hand mechanically, and, taking my gift, she put it on the bench beside her, as if that was what I gave it to her for, and fixed her eyes on her book again, as in a daze. I was ready to weep with disappointment. "I only hope my bouquet remains beside her," I was thinking, "I only hope she doesn't forget about it." I lay down in the grass a little distance away, pillowed my head in my arm, and closed my eyes, pretending to be overcome with sleep. But I kept watching her and waiting.

This went on for about ten minutes; I fancied she was growing paler and paler. Suddenly, blessed chance came to my rescue.

This was a large golden bee, brought by the gentle and kind breeze to help me. It buzzed over my head first, and then it flew towards Mme M. Twice she tried to chase it away with a wave of her hand, but the bee seemed bent on becoming more and more tiresome. At last Mme M. snatched up my bouquet and waved it in front of her face. In the same second, the envelope broke free of the flowers and fell straight into her open book. I started. For a few moments Mme M., mute with amazement, looked first at the envelope and then at the flowers she was holding in her hands, and she could not trust her own eyes, it seemed... Suddenly she blushed, started, and glanced at me. But I forestalled her look and shut my eyes tight, pretending I was fast asleep; nothing in the world would have made me look straight into her face just then. My heart fluttered and sank as though

it were a little bird which had been caught in the clutches of a tousle-haired village boy. I cannot say how long I lay thus with my eyes closed: two or three minutes I should say. At last I ventured to open them. Mme M. was reading the letter hungrily, and I could tell by her flaming cheeks, her sparkling, tearful eyes, and her blissful face in which every line was aglow with a joyful awareness, that this letter held happiness for her and that her anguish, all of it, was now dispersed like smoke. My heart was imbued with a poignant sweetness, it was an effort to pretend.

Never shall I forget that moment!

Suddenly voices came calling, from quite a distance away:

"Madame M.! Natalie! Natalie!"

The voices of two women. One I knew well: it belonged to my blonde friend; the other I did not know.

Mme M. did not call back, but she quickly left her seat, came up to me, and bent over me. I could feel her looking straight into my face. My eyelashes quivered, but I controlled myself and did not open my eyes. I tried to make my breathing more even and tranquil, but my heart was smothering me with its turbulent beating. Her hot breath scorched my cheek; she bent very, very close to my face, as if to make sure. And then a kiss and tear-drops fell on my hand — the hand that lay across my breast. And twice she kissed it.

"Natalie! Natalie! Where are you?" the voices sounded again but very close to us now.

"Coming!" Mme M. replied in her rich, silvery voice, which was muffled and trembling with tears now, and so softly that I alone could have heard her. "I'm coming!"

But at last my heart betrayed me and, emptying itself of blood, sent it all up into my face. In the same moment, a quick, hot kiss scorched my lips. I cried out weakly and opened my eyes, but her gauze scarf fell upon my face right then — it was as if she wanted to protect me from the sun with it. The next moment she was gone. All I could hear was the gentle patter of her hurriedly vanishing footsteps. I was alone.

I tore the scarf off my face and kissed it, beside myself with rapture; for a while I was like one demented! Gasping for breath, I lay in the grass propped on my arms, staring before me vacantly and fixedly at the hills patched with cornfields, at the river flowing its intricate course around them and winding, as far as the eye could see, between more hills and villages which one caught glimpses of like dots over the whole sunlit landscape, at the blue, barely visible forest, smoking,

it seemed, on the edge of the burning skies, and little by little a sweet calmness, inspired by the solemn tranquillity of the view, brought peace to my turbulent spirit. I felt better and breathed more freely. But my soul was suffering sweet and subdued torment, as though through insight into something, or with a foreboding of something. My frightened heart, fluttering softly in anticipation, was beginning to understand something, timidly and happily. And all at once my bosom heaved and ached as if something had pierced it, and tears, sweet tears, burst from my eyes. I covered my face with my hands and, quivering like an aspen leaf, I surrendered myself unrestrainedly to this first revelation and acknowledgement of my feelings to this first, as yet obscure, insight into my inner self... That moment marked the end of my childhood...

When, two hours later, I arrived at the house, I found Mme M. no longer there: owing to some unforeseen circumstances, she had left for Moscow with her husband. I never met her again.

*Translated by Olga Shartse*



# Anton Chekhov

## LOVE



“Three o’clock in the morning. Through my window I can see a calm April night gently twinkling its stars at me. I cannot sleep. It is all too wonderful!

“From head to heel I am breached by a strange and incomprehensible feeling. I am unable to analyse this feeling now, there is no time, I cannot be bothered, and anyway what good would analysis do? If a person is falling head-first from a bell-tower, or if he has just learnt that he has won two hundred thousand, he’s not going to start looking for any sense in his feelings. He wouldn’t dream of doing such a thing.”

This is approximately how I began my letter to Sasha, a nineteen-year-old girl with whom I had fallen in love. I began the letter five times, and just as often tore it up, I crossed out whole pages and set about copying them out again. I was a long time sitting over the letter, as though it were a commissioned novel, and this was not at all because I wanted it to come out any longer, more elaborate or more full of fine sentiment, but rather because I wished to extend indefinitely the actual process of writing, sitting in the quiet of my room, looked down upon by a spring night, and conversing with my dreams. Between the lines I saw the precious image of Sasha’s face, and I seemed to sense that there were spirits sitting with me at my table, just like

me: naively happy, foolish and blissfully smiling spirits, also writing love letters.

As I wrote I was constantly glancing at my hand which was still warm from the recent handshake, and if I looked away I saw the lattice of the green gate. It was through this gate that Sasha had looked at me after we had said our good-byes. Whenever I said good-bye to Sasha I would be thinking of nothing, merely admiring her figure, as every self-respecting person admires a pretty woman. And when I saw her two large eyes through the gate then suddenly, as though by instinct, I realised that I was in love, that everything was settled and final between us, and all that was left was to carry out a number of formalities.

It is also an extremely pleasant feeling to seal up a love letter, slowly put on one's hat and coat, quietly slip out of the house and carry one's treasure to the pillar-box. The stars have already left the sky and in their place, to the east, there is a long, pale strip of sky above the roofs of the sullen houses; this paleness, broken here and there by clouds, is gradually growing to cover the whole sky. The town is still asleep, but the water-carriers are already up and about, and the hooter of a distant factory is waking up the workers. Near the pillar-box in its light covering of dew you will almost certainly see a clumsy concierge wearing a bell-shaped sheepskin coat and leaning on a stick. He is in a state of catalepsy: he is neither asleep nor awake, but something in-between...

If a pillar-box knew how often people approach it, as an oracle, to learn their fate, then it would not maintain such a meek appearance. I at least was almost ready to cover my pillar-box with kisses and, as I looked at it, I thought what a great blessing the postal service is!..

To anyone who was ever in love I would suggest you recall how, having posted a letter, you would often hurry home, climb quickly into bed and pull the blanket over you, firm in the belief that no sooner would you wake up on the morrow than a recollection of the events of the previous day would grip you, and you would look with rapture at the window where the daylight would be pouring eagerly through the folds of the curtains...

But to the matter in hand... The next day, at noon, Sasha's maid brought me an answer: "I am very happy come today please you must come I will expect you. Yours S." Not a single comma. This lack of punctuation, 'will' instead of 'shall', the whole letter and even the long slim envelope in which it was carried — everything filled my

heart with tenderness. In the vigorous, yet timid writing I recognised the way Sasha walked, the way her eyebrows rose when she laughed, even the movement of her lips... But I found the contents of the letter unsatisfactory... Firstly, one doesn't expect an answer like that to a poetical letter; and secondly, why should I go to Sasha's house and sit there waiting for her plump mama, her little brothers and the various old retainers to realise that we wish to be left alone? They won't even dream of realising it, and there's nothing more disagreeable than having to hold one's raptures in check simply because hovering next to you is a walking booby in the person of a hard-of-hearing old woman or a young girl asking a lot of questions. I sent an answer with the maid, suggesting that Sasha choose a park or boulevard as a place to meet. My suggestion, fitting in opportunely with Sasha's real wishes, was gladly accepted.

Some time after four o'clock that same evening I made my way to the farthest and most unfrequented corner of the town park. There was not a soul in the park, and the rendezvous could have been arranged for somewhere a little nearer, perhaps in one of the alleyways or in a summer-house, but women do not like love affairs by halves: if it's honey, then lap it up with a spoon; and if it's a rendezvous, then make it in the farthest and most impenetrable thicket, where there's always a chance you'll bump into a ruffian or a drunken townsman.

When I approached Sasha she was standing with her back to me, and in her back I read the devil knows how much mystery. Her spine, the back of her head and even the black specks on the pattern of her dress seemed to be saying: *sshh!* She was dressed in a simple cotton dress with a light, sleeveless cloak thrown over her shoulders. To enhance the mystery her face was hidden behind a white veil. And so as not to spoil the harmony I was supposed to approach on tiptoe and start talking in a whisper.

As I now understand it, I was not the essence of that rendezvous, but merely a detail. Sasha was not so interested in the *person* she was with, as in the romance of the meeting, its mystery, the kisses, the silence of the gloomy trees, my oaths... Not for a single moment did she forget herself and let the expression of mystery drop from her face; and indeed, had my place been taken by any old Ivan Sidorovich or Sidor Ivanovich, then she would have been equally delighted. You just try to work out, under such circumstances, whether you are loved or not. And if you are, is it for real or not?

I led Sasha out of the park and took her back to my rooms. The presence in a bachelor's home of the woman he loves has much the

same effect as music and wine. He usually begins talking about the future, and his self-assurance and air of self-sufficiency know no bounds. He makes plans, talks eagerly about becoming a general — being as yet not even an ensign — and, all in all, he puts on a spiel of such eloquent nonsense that his listener must be possessed of a great deal of love, and of ignorance of life, to keep saying 'yes' and nodding in the right places. Fortunately for men, women in love are always blinded by their love and are never anything but ignorant of life. And what is more, they not only agree with whatever the man may say, they also positively turn pale in blissful horror, and revere and hang on greedily to the poor maniac's every word. Sasha listened to me attentively, but soon I noticed a certain absent-mindedness on her face: she did not understand me. The future of which I was telling her interested her only in its outward aspects, and it was in vain that I unfolded my plans before her. She was far more interested in the question as to which would be her room, or what paper would be on the walls in this room, why did I have an upright piano and not a grand, etc., etc. She carefully examined the knick-knacks on my desk, looked at the photographs there, sniffed at my scent-bottles and for some reason took the used stamps off a number of envelopes.

"Please do keep your used stamps for me!" she said, putting on a serious face. "Please!"

Then she found a nut on the window-sill, cracked it open with her teeth, and ate it.

"Why don't you stick little labels on your books?" she asked, glancing at my bookcase.

"What for?"

"So that each book can have its own number... And where am I going to put my books? I have books of my own, you know."

"What books are they?" I asked.

Sasha raised her eyebrows, thought for a moment, and said:

"All sorts..."

And if I had bothered to ask her what ideas she had, what opinions, beliefs or aims, then she would have probably raised her eyebrows in exactly the same way, would have thought for a moment, and said: "All sorts..."

When I had accompanied Sasha back to her home and said farewell to her I was a real, genuine, sealed-and-delivered fiancé, as I would remain until we were married. If you will allow me to judge from my own personal experience alone, then I can assure you that being a fiancé is very boring, far more boring than being



a husband, more so even than being nothing at all. A fiancé is neither one thing nor another: he has left one shore but has not yet reached the other; he is not married, and yet he cannot say that he is a bachelor; he is in a condition something like that of the concierge I mentioned earlier.

Every day, when I found myself with a free minute, I would hurry to my bride-to-be. On my way to see her I would usually carry with me a multitude of hopes, desires, intentions, suggestions and words. And every time I felt that no sooner would the maid have opened the door than I, stifled and suffocating as I was, would plunge body and soul into a refreshing happiness. But this, in fact, never happened. Each time I visited my fiancée's home I found her whole family and household engaged in sewing her silly trousseau. (A propos: they were sewing for fully two months, and managed to put together less than a hundred roubles.) There was always a smell of ironing, stearin and charcoal. Tiny glass beads crunched underfoot. The two main rooms were piled high with wave after wave of linen, calico and muslin; Sasha's head would be peering out of these waves, and she would have a thread held between her teeth. All the seamstresses met me with a joyous cry, but I would be ushered immediately into the dining-room, where I could do no harm and would see nothing that was only for the eyes of husbands. I would have to sit, reluctantly, in the dining-room, and converse with Pimenova, one of the household dependants. Sasha herself, full of cares and anxieties, would constantly be running past me with a thimble, or a hank of wool, or some other such boring trifle.

"Wait, wait!.. I'll be with you..." she would say whenever I raised my beseeching eyes to her. "Would you believe it, that awful Stepanida has gone and spoilt all the bodice on the barege dress!"

And, losing my temper a little and not waiting for further favours, I would leave the house and take a fiancé's stroll up and down the pavement in the company of my walking-stick. And then, if by chance I took a fancy to going for a stroll, or a ride, with my bride-to-be, I would call on her and she would already be standing in the hall with her mama, all dressed up and playing with her parasol.

"We're just off to the Arcade!" she would say. "We need to buy some more cashmere, and I have a hat that wants changing."

The stroll *à deux* is gone! There is nothing for it but to join the ladies and accompany them to the Arcade. It is maddeningly boring to listen to women in shops, haggling and trying to outwit the swindling shopkeeper. I felt quite ashamed whenever Sasha, having turned over

a whole mass of materials and beaten down the price *ad minimum*, left the shop without buying anything, or asked for a piece of cloth costing no more than forty or fifty kopecks. Sasha and her mama, leaving the shop with anxious and worried faces, would then spend ever so long discussing whether they had made a mistake, perhaps bought what they should not have bought, or maybe the flowers on the cotton-print were a little too dark.

Yes, it is boring being a fiancé! But enough of that!

Now I am married. It is evening. I am sitting in my study reading. Sasha is sitting behind me on the sofa and chewing something noisily. I want a drink of beer.

"Have a look for the corkscrew, Sasha," I say. "It's lying around here somewhere."

Sasha jumps up, rummages untidily in two or three stacks of papers, drops the matches, doesn't find the corkscrew, and sits down again in silence... Five or ten minutes pass, and I've got an aching...

"Sasha, have another look for the corkscrew," I say.

Sasha again jumps up and rummages in the papers near me. Her chewing and the rustling of the papers affect me like the grating of one knife being drawn along another... I stand up and start looking for the corkscrew myself. At last it is found, and the beer is opened. Sasha remains standing by my desk and starts chattering.

"Why don't you read a book, Sasha?" I say.

She picks up a book, sits down opposite me and begins to move her lips. I look at her small forehead and her moving lips, and I become lost in thought.

"She's almost twenty," I think to myself. "If you take a young man of the same age, and compare them, what a difference! The young man has knowledge, and opinions, and a brain."

But I forgive this difference, just as I forgive the narrow forehead and the lips moving... I remember how, in my Lovelace days, I would throw a woman over for a stain on her stocking, for a single foolish word, or for not having cleaned her teeth; but here I forgive everything, the chewing, all the bother with the corkscrew, the untidiness and all the unnecessary mountains of words about molehills. I forgive almost without thinking, making no effort of will, as though Sasha's mistakes are my mistakes, and much of what used to jar upon me now fills me with tenderness, even rapture. The reasons for this all-forgiveness are to be found in my love for Sasha; but where the reasons for this love are to be found, I really cannot say.

*Translated by Graham Whittaker*


# Alexander Kuprin

## THE GARNET BRACELET



Ludwig van Beethoven.  
2. Son. (op. 2, No. 2).  
Largo Appassionato

### I

 In mid-August, before the new moon, there suddenly came a spell of bad weather, of the kind peculiar to the north coast of the Black Sea. Dense, heavy fog lay on land and sea, and the huge lighthouse siren roared like a mad bull day and night. Then a drizzle, as fine as water dust, fell steadily from morning to morning and turned the clayey roads and footpaths into a thick mass of mud, in which carts and carriages would be bogged for a long time. And then a fierce hurricane began to blow from the steppeland in the north-west; the tree-tops rocked and heaved like waves in a gale, and at night the iron roofing of houses rattled, as if someone in heavy boots were running over it; window-frames shook, doors banged, and there was a wild howling in the chimneys. Several fishing boats lost their bearings at sea, and two of them did not come back; a week later fishermen's bodies were washed ashore here and there.

The inhabitants of a suburban seaside resort — mostly Greeks and Jews, life-loving and over-apprehensive like all Southerners — were hurrying back to town. On the muddy highway an endless succession of drays dragged along, overloaded with mattresses, sofas, chests, chairs, wash-stands, samovars. Through the blurred muslin of the drizzle, it was a pitiful and dismal sight — the wretched bag and baggage, which looked so shabby, so drab and beggarly; the maids and cooks sitting atop of the carts on soaked tarpaulin, holding irons, cans or baskets; the exhausted, panting horses which halted every

now and again, their knees trembling, their flanks steaming; the draymen who swore huskily, wrapped in matting against the rain. An even sorrier sight were the deserted houses, now bare, empty and spacious, with their ravaged flowerbeds, smashed panes, abandoned dogs and rubbish — cigarette ends, bits of paper, broken crockery, cartons, and medicine bottles.

But the weather changed abruptly in late August. There came calm, cloudless days that were sunnier and mellow than they had been in July. Autumn gossamer glinted like mica on the bristly yellow stubble in the dried fields. The trees, restored to their quietude, were meekly shedding their leaves.

Princess Vera Nikolayevna Sheyina, wife of the marshal of nobility, had been unable to leave her villa because repairs were not yet finished at the town house. And now she was overjoyed by the lovely days, the calm and solitude and pure air, the swallows twittering on the telegraph wires as they flocked together to fly south, and the caressing salty breeze that drifted gently from the sea.

## II

Besides, that day — the seventeenth of September — was her name-day. She had always loved it, associating it with remote, cherished memories of her childhood, and always expected it to bring on something wonderfully happy. In the morning, before leaving for town on urgent business, her husband had put on her night-table a case with magnificent ear-rings of pear-shaped pearls, and the present added to her cheerful mood.

She was all alone in the house. Her unmarried brother Nikolai, assistant public prosecutor, who usually lived with them, had also gone to town for a court hearing. Her husband had promised to bring to dinner none but a few of their closest friends. It was fortunate that her birthday was during the summer season, for in town they would have had to spend a good deal of money on a grand festive dinner, perhaps even a ball, while here at the seaside the expenses could be cut to a bare minimum. Despite his prominence in society, or possibly because of it, Prince Sheyin could hardly make both ends meet. The huge family estate had been almost ruined by his ancestors, while his position obliged him to live above his means: give receptions, engage in charity, dress well, keep horses, and so on. Princess Vera, with whom the former passionate

love for her husband had long ago toned down to a true, lasting friendship, spared no pains to help him ward off complete ruin. Without his suspecting it she went without many things she wanted, and ran the household as thriftily as she could.

She was now walking about the garden, carefully clipping off flowers for the dinner table. The flowerbeds stripped almost bare looked neglected. The double carnations of various colours were past their best, and so were the stocks — half in bloom, half laden with thin green pods that smelled of cabbage; on the rose-bushes, blooming for the third time that summer, there were still a few undersized buds and flowers. But then the dahlias, peonies and asters flaunted their haughty beauty, filling the hushed air with a grassy, sad autumnal scent. The other flowers, whose season of luxurious love and overfruitful maternity was over, were quietly dropping innumerable seeds of future life.

A three-tone motor-car horn sounded on the nearby highway, announcing that Anna Nikolayevna Friesse, Princess Vera's sister, was coming. She had telephoned that morning to say that she would come and help about the house and to receive the guests.

Vera's keen ear had not betrayed her. She went to meet the arrival. A few minutes later an elegant sedan drew up at the gate; the chauffeur jumped nimbly down and flung the door open.

The two sisters kissed joyfully. A warm affection had bound them together since early childhood. They were strangely unlike each other in appearance. The elder sister, Vera, resembled her mother, a beautiful Englishwoman; she had a tall, lithe figure, a delicate but cold and proud face, well-formed if rather large hands, and charmingly sloping shoulders such as you see in old miniatures. The younger sister, Anna, had the Mongol features of her father, a Tatar prince, whose grandfather had not been christened until the early nineteenth century and whose forbears were descended from Tamerlane himself, or Timur Lenk, the Tatar name by which her father proudly called the great murderer. Standing half a head shorter than her sister, she was rather broad-shouldered, lively and frivolous, and very fond of teasing people. Her face of a markedly Mongol cast — with prominent cheek-bones, narrow eyes which she, moreover, often screwed up because she was short-sighted, and a haughty expression about her small, sensuous mouth, especially its full, slightly protruding lower lip — had, nevertheless, an elusive and unaccountable fascination which lay perhaps in her smile, in the deeply feminine quality of all her features, or in her piquant,

coquettish expression. Her graceful lack of beauty excited and drew men's attention much more frequently and strongly than her sister's aristocratic loveliness.

She was married to a very wealthy and very stupid man, who did absolutely nothing though he was on the board of some sort of charity institution and bore the title of *Kammerjunker*. She loathed her husband, but she had borne him two children — a boy and a girl; she had made up her mind not to have any more children. As for Vera, she longed to have children, as many as possible, but for some reason she had none, and she morbidly and passionately adored her younger sister's pretty, anaemic children, always well-behaved and obedient, with pallid, mealy faces and curled doll hair of a flaxen colour.

Anna was all gay disorder and sweet, sometimes freakish contradictions. She readily gave herself up to the most reckless flirting in all the capitals and health resorts of Europe, but she was never unfaithful to her husband, whom she, however, ridiculed contemptuously both to his face and behind his back. She was extravagant and very fond of gambling, dances, new sensations and exciting spectacles, and when abroad she would frequent cafés of doubtful repute. But she was also generously kind and deeply, sincerely religious — so much so that she had secretly become a Catholic. Her back, bosom and shoulders were of rare beauty. When she went to a grand ball she would bare herself far beyond the limits allowed by decorum or fashion, but it was said that under the lowcut dress she always wore a hair shirt.

Vera, on the other hand, was rigidly plain-mannered, coldly, condescendingly amiable to all, and as aloof and composed as a queen.

### III

"Oh, how nice it is here! How very nice!" said Anna as she walked with swift little steps along the path beside her sister. "Let's sit for a while on the bench above the bluff, if you don't mind. I haven't seen the sea for ages. The air is so wonderful here — it cheers your heart to breathe it. Last summer I made an amazing discovery in the Crimea, in Miskhor. Do you know what surf water smells like? Just imagine — it smells like mignonette."

Vera smiled affectionately.

"You always fancy things."

"But it does. Once everybody laughed at me, I remember, when I said that moonlight had a kind of pink shade. But a couple of days ago Boritsky — that artist who's doing my portrait — said that I was right and that artists have known about it for a long time."

"Is that artist your latest infatuation?"

"You always get queer ideas!" Anna laughed, then, stepping quickly to the edge of the bluff, which dropped in a sheer wall deep into the sea, she looked down and suddenly cried out in terror, starting back, her face pale.

"What a height!" Her voice was faint and tremulous. "When I look down from so high up it gives me a sort of sweet, nasty creeps ... and my toes ache. And yet I'm drawn to it!"

She was about to look down again, but her sister held her back.

"For heaven's sake, Anna dear! I feel giddy myself when you do that. Sit down, I beg you."

"All right, all right, I will. But see how beautiful it is, how exhilarating — you just can't look enough. If you knew how thankful I am to God for all the wonders he has wrought for us!"

Both fell to thinking for a moment. The sea lay at rest far, far below. The shore could not be seen from the bench, and that enhanced the feeling of the immensity and majesty of the sea. The water was calm and friendly and cheerfully blue, except for pale blue oblique stripes marking the currents, and on the horizon it changed to an intense blue.

Fishing boats, hardly discernible, were dozing motionless in the smooth water, not far from the shore. And farther away a three-master, draped from top to bottom in white, shapely sails bellied out by the wind, seemed to be suspended in the air, making no headway.

"I see what you mean," said the elder sister thoughtfully, "but somehow I don't feel about it the way you do. When I see the sea for the first time after a long interval, it excites and staggers me. I feel as if I were looking at an enormous, solemn wonder I'd never seen before. But afterwards, when I'm used to it, its flat emptiness begins to crush me. I feel bored as I look at it, and I try not to look any more."

Anna smiled.

"What is it?" asked her sister.

"Last summer," said Anna slyly, "we rode in a big cavalcade from Yalta to Uch Kosh. That's beyond the forester's house, above the falls. At first we wandered into some mist, it was very damp and we couldn't see well, but we climbed higher, up a steep path, between

pine-trees. Then the forest ended, and we were out of the mist. Imagine a narrow foothold on a cliff, and a precipice below. The villages seemed no bigger than match-boxes, the forests and gardens were like so much grass. The whole landscape lay below like a map. And farther down was the sea, stretching away for thirty or sixty miles. I fancied I was hanging in mid-air and was going to fly. It was so beautiful, and made me feel so light! I turned and said happily to the guide, 'Well, Seyid-oghly, isn't it lovely?' But he clicked his tongue and said, 'Ah, leddy, you don'to know how fed up I am vid all dat. I sees it every day.'

"Thank you for the comparison," said Vera with a laugh. "But I simply think that we Northerners can never understand the charm of the sea. I love the forest. Do you remember our woods back in Yegorovskoye? How could you ever be bored by them? The pine-trees! And the moss! And the death-caps — looking as if they were made of red satin embroidered with white beads. It's so still, so cool."

"It makes no difference to me — I love everything," answered Anna. "But I love best of all my little sister, my dear sensible Vera. There are only two of us in the world, you know."

She put her arm round her sister and snuggled against her cheek to cheek. And suddenly she started.

"But how silly of me! We sit here like characters in a novel, talking about Nature, and I quite forgot about my present. Here, look. Only I'm afraid you may not like it."

She took from her handbag a small notebook in an unusual binding: on a background of old blue velvet, worn and grey with time, there wound a dull-golden filigree pattern of exquisite intricacy and beauty, apparently the diligent handiwork of a skilful and assiduous artist. The notebook was attached to a gold chain, thin as a thread, and the sheets inside it had been replaced by ivory plates.

"What a beauty! It's gorgeous!" said Vera, and kissed her sister. "Thank you. Where did you get this treasure?"

"In a curiosity shop. You know my weakness for rummaging in old trash. That was how I came upon this prayer-book. See how the ornament here shapes into a cross. I only found the binding, and everything else — the leaves, clasps and pencil — I had to think up myself. Hard as I tried to explain my idea to Mollinet, he simply refused to see what I wanted. The clasps should have been made in the same style as the whole pattern — dull in tone, of old gold, finely engraved — but he's done God knows what. However,



the chain is of genuine Venetian workmanship, very old."

Admiringly Vera stroked the magnificent binding.

"What hoary antiquity! I wonder how old this notebook is," she said.

"I can only guess. It must date from the late seventeenth or mid-eighteenth century."

"How strange," said Vera, with a pensive smile. "Here I am holding an object that may have been touched by the hand of Marquise de Pompadour or Marie Antoinette herself. Oh, Anna, it's so like you, to make a lady's *carnet* out of a prayer-book. But let's go and see what's going on inside."

They went into the house across a large terrace paved with flagstone and enclosed on all sides by trellises of Isabella grape-vine. The black rich clusters smelling faintly of strawberries hung heavily amid the dark green, gilded here and there by the sun. The terrace was submerged in a green half-light, which cast a pale reflection on the faces of the two women.

"Are you going to have dinner served here?" asked Anna.

"I was at first. But the evenings are so chilly now. I prefer the dining-room. The men may come out here to smoke."

"Will you have anybody worth seeing?"

"I don't know yet. All I know is that our Grandad is coming."

"Ah, dear Grandad! How lovely!" cried Anna, clasping her hands, "I haven't seen him for ages."

"Vasya's sister is coming too, and Professor Speshnikov, I think. I was at my wits' end yesterday. You know they both like good food — Grandad and the professor. But you can't get a thing here or in town, for love or money. Luka came by quail somewhere — ordered them from a hunter he knew — and is now trying his skill on them. The beef isn't bad, comparatively speaking — alas! the inevitable roast beef! Then we have very nice lobsters."

"Well, it doesn't sound so bad, after all. Don't worry. Between you and me, you like good food yourself."

"But we'll also have something special. This morning a fisherman brought us a gurnard. I saw it myself. It's a monster, really. Terrible even to look at."

Anna, who was eagerly inquisitive about everything whether it concerned her or not, wanted to see the gurnard at once.

Luka, a tall man with a clean-shaven sallow face, came in carrying a white oblong basin, which he held with difficulty by the lugs, careful not to spill the water on the parquet floor.

"Twelve and a half pounds, Your Highness," he said, with the peculiar pride of a cook. "We weighed it a while back."

The fish was too big for the basin and lay with its tail curled. Its scales were shot with gold, the fins were a bright red, and two long fan-like wings, of a delicate blue, stood out from the huge rapacious head. It was still alive and vigorously worked its gills.

The younger sister cautiously touched the fish's head with her little finger. But the gurnard lashed out with its tail, and Anna with a scream snatched back her hand.

"You can depend on it, Your Highness, we'll arrange everything in the best manner," said the cook, obviously aware of Vera's anxiety. "Just now a Bulgarian brought two pine-apple melons. They're a bit like cantaloups, only they smell much nicer. And may I ask Your Highness what gravy you will have with the gurnard: *tartare* or *polonaise*, or simply rusk in butter?"

"Do as you like. You may go," said the princess.

#### IV

After five o'clock the guests began to arrive. Prince Vasily Lvovich brought his widowed sister, Lyudmila Lvovna Durasova, a stout, good-natured woman who spoke very little; Vasyuchok, a wealthy young scapegrace and rake, whom everybody in town called by that familiar name, and who was very good company because he could sing and recite poetry, as well as arrange tableaux vivants, theatricals and charity bazaars; the famous pianist Jennie Reiter, a friend of Princess Vera's from the Smolny Institute; and also his brother-in-law, Nikolai Nikolayevich. After them came in a motor-car Anna's husband, along with the fat, hulking Professor Speshnikov, and the vice-governor, von Seck. The last to arrive was General Anosov, who came in a fine hired landau, accompanied by two officers: Staff Colonel Ponamaryov, looking older than his age, a lean, bilious man worn out by clerical drudgery, and Guards Lieutenant Bakhtinsky of the Hussars, who was reputed to be the best dancer and master of ceremonies in Petersburg.

General Anosov, a silver-haired old man, tall and obese, stepped heavily down from the footboard, holding on to the rail of the box with one hand and to the back of the landau with the other. In his left hand he carried an ear-trumpet and in his right a rubber-

tipped cane. He had a large, coarse, red face with a fleshy nose, and he looked out of narrowed eyes with the dignified, mildly contemptuous good humour typical of courageous and plain men who have often met danger and death face to face. The two sisters, who recognized him from afar, ran up to the landau just in time to support him half-jokingly under the arms.

"You'd think I was the bishop," said the general in a friendly, husky boom.

"Grandad, dear Grandad!" said Vera, a little reproachfully. "All these days we've been expecting you, and you haven't let us get so much as a glimpse of you."

"Our Grandad's lost all shame here in the south," said Anna with a laugh. "As if you couldn't have thought of your godchild. You behave like a shameless old fop, and you've forgotten all about us."

The general, who had bared his majestic head, kissed the hands of the sisters, then he kissed both women on the cheeks and again on the hands.

"Wait, girls, don't scold me," he said pausing for breath after each word because of his long-standing asthma. "Upon my honour — those wretched doctors — have been treating my rheumatism all summer — with some sort of foul jelly — it smells awful — And they wouldn't let me go — You're the first — I'm calling on — Very glad — to see you — How are you getting along? You're quite the lady, Vera — you look very much like — your late mother — When'll you be inviting me to the christening?"

"I'm afraid never, Grandad."

"Don't give up hope — it'll come yet — Pray to God. And you, Anna, you haven't changed a bit — At sixty you'll be — the same fidget. But wait. Let me introduce these gentlemen to you."

"I had the honour long ago," said Colonel Ponamaryov, bowing.

"I was introduced to the princess in Petersburg," added the Hussar.

"Well, then, Anna, may I introduce to you Lieutenant Bakhtinsky. He's a dancer and brawler, but a good horseman all the same. There, my dear Bakhtinsky, take that thing from the carriage. Come along, girls. What are you going to feed us on, Vera dear? After the starvation diet — those doctors kept me on — I have the appetite of an ensign — on graduation."

General Anosov had been a companion-in-arms and devoted friend of the late Prince Mirza-Bulat-Tuganovsky. After the prince's death he had passed on to his daughters all his love and affection. He

had known them when they were quite small — indeed, he was Anna's godfather. At that time he had been, as he still was, governor of a big but almost abandoned fortress in the town of K., and had come to Tuganovsky's almost daily. The children literally adored him because he pampered them, gave them presents, and offered them boxes at the circus or the theatre, and also because no one could play with them so well as he could. But what they liked and remembered best was his stories of military campaigns, of battles and bivouacs, of victories and retreats, of death and wounds and severe frosts — artless unhurried stories, calm as an epic, told between evening tea and the hated hour when the children were told to go to bed.

This fragment of old times appeared as a colossal and strangely picturesque figure. He combined those simple but deep and touching traits which, even in his day were more often to be found among the privates than among the officers, those purely Russian, muzhik traits which, taken together, form an exalted character that sometimes makes our soldier not only invincible but a martyr, almost a saint. He has a guileless, naive faith, a clear, cheerfully good-natured view of life, cool and matter-of-fact courage, humility in the face of death, pity for the vanquished, infinite patience, and amazing physical and moral stamina.

Since the Polish War Anosov had taken part in every campaign except the Japanese. He would not have hesitated to go to that war either, but he was not called upon, and he had a maxim which was great in its modesty: "Never challenge death until you're called." Throughout his service he never struck any of his men, let alone had them flogged. During the Polish uprising he refused to shoot a group of prisoners despite the regimental commander's personal orders. "If it's a spy, I can not only have him shot," he said, "but am ready to kill him with my own hand if you command me to. But these men are prisoners, and I can't do it." And he said that simply and respectfully, without the least hint of challenge or bravado, looking his superior straight in the eyes with his own clear, steady eyes, so that instead of shooting him for disobeying orders they let him alone.

During the war of 1877-1879, he rose very quickly to the rank of colonel, although he lacked proper education or, as he put it himself, had finished only a "bear's academy". He took part in crossing the Danube and the Balkan Mountains, camped at Shipka through the winter, and was among those who launched the last

attack on Plevna; he was wounded five times, once seriously, and got severe concussion from a grenade splinter. General Radetsky and Skobelev knew him personally and had a great respect for him. It was about him that Skobelev had said, "I know an officer who is much braver than I am, and that officer's Major Anosov."

He returned from the war almost deaf from the grenade splinter; three toes on one foot had been amputated as a result of frost-bite during the Balkan march, and he had contracted an acute rheumatism at Shipka. After two years of peace-time service it was deemed timely to retire him, but he rebelled. The governor of the territory, who had witnessed his cool courage in crossing the Danube, brought his influence to bear at the critical moment. The Petersburg authorities decided not to hurt the feelings of the distinguished colonel and gave him for life the governorship of K., an office which was honorary rather than indispensable for the defence of the country.

Everyone in town knew him and good-naturedly made fun of his foibles and habits and the way he dressed. He never carried arms, and he went about in a long, old-fashioned coat and a cap with a large top and an enormous straight visor, a cane in his right hand and an ear-trumpet in his left; he was always accompanied by two fat, lazy, hoarse pugs with tongues lolling between their clamped jaws. If in the course of his morning stroll he met an acquaintance, the passers-by several blocks away could hear him shouting and the pugs barking in unison.

Like many people who are hard of hearing, he was passionately fond of opera, and sometimes, during a romantic duet, his commanding boom would suddenly resound throughout the hall, "Why, that was a jolly good C, damn him! Cracked it right through like a nut." Subdued laughter would ripple across the hall, but the general would suspect nothing, being under the impression that he had merely whispered a comment in his neighbour's ear.

As part of his official duties he often visited, together with his wheezing pugs, the guard-house where officers under arrest relaxed comfortably from the hardships of military service, telling stories over tea and cards. He would carefully question each of them, "Your name? Who arrested you? For how long? What for?" Sometimes he would quite unexpectedly commend an officer for a courageous if unlawful act, or take him to task so loudly that he could be heard outside. But when he had finished shouting he would inquire almost in the same breath where the officer got his meals and how much they cost him. It sometimes happened that a lieutenant,

who had erred and been sent for a prolonged detention from an out-of-the-way corner that had no guard-room of its own, would confess that, being short of funds, he had to eat with the privates. Anosov then would immediately order meals to be supplied to the poor devil from his own home, which was no more than a hundred yards from the guard-house.

It was in K. that he had grown intimate with the Tuganovsky family and established a close friendship with the children, so that with him it had become a virtual necessity to see them every evening. If it so happened that the young ladies went away somewhere or he himself was kept away by his official duties, he would feel terribly lonely and melancholy in the large rooms of the governor's mansion. Every summer he would take his leave and spend a whole month at the Tuganovsky estate, Yegorovskoye, some forty miles from K.

All his repressed tenderness and his longing for love had gone out to the children, especially the girls. Once he had been married, but that had been so long ago that he hardly remembered it. It was before the war that his wife had eloped with an actor, who had fascinated her with his velvet jacket and lace cuffs. Anosov paid her an allowance as long as she lived, but did not permit her to come back to him despite all the scenes of repentance and tearful letters. They had had no children.

## V

Unexpectedly, the evening was calm and warm, and the candles on the terrace and in the dining-room burned with a steady flame. At dinner Prince Vasily Lvovich amused the company. He had an extraordinary and very peculiar gift for telling stories. He would take some incident that had happened to one of the company or a common acquaintance, but would embellish it so, and use so matter-of-fact a tone, that his listeners would split their sides with laughter. That night he was telling the story of Nikolai Nikolayevich's unhappy wooing of a wealthy and beautiful lady. The only authentic detail was the husband's refusal to give her a divorce. But the prince skilfully combined fact and fancy. He made the grave, rather priggish Nikolai run down the street in his stockinged feet at the dead of night, his boots under his arm. At a corner the young man was stopped by the policeman, and it was only after a long and stormy explanation that Nikolai managed to convince him that he was an as-

sistant public prosecutor and not a burglar. The wedding all but came off, or so the narrator said, except that at the crucial moment a band of false witnesses, who had a hand in the affair, suddenly went on strike demanding a rise. Being a stingy man — which he actually was, to some extent — and also being opposed on principle to all forms of strike, Nikolai flatly refused to pay more, referring to a certain clause in the law, which was confirmed by a ruling of the court of appeal. Then, in reply to the customary question, "Does anyone here present know of any impediment to the lawful joining together of these two in matrimony?" the enraged perjurers said as one man, "Yes, we do. All that we have testified under oath in court is a falsehood to which the prosecutor here forced us by intimidation and coercion. As for this lady's husband, we can only say from personal knowledge that he is the most respectable man in the world, chaste as Joseph and kind as an angel."

Having begun to tell wedding stories, Prince Vasily did not spare even Gustav Ivanovich Friesse, Anna's husband, who, he said, had on the day following his wedding called the police to evict the young bride from her parents' house because she had no passport of her own and to install her in her lawful husband's home. The only part of the tale which was true was the fact that, in the very first days of her married life, Anna had had to be continually with her sick mother because Vera had gone off south, and poor Gustav Ivanovich was plunged in despair.

Everybody laughed. Anna smiled with her narrowed eyes. Gustav Ivanovich guffawed in delight, and his gaunt face with the tight, shining skin, the thin, light hair sleeked carefully down and the deep-set eyes was like a skull mirthfully baring a set of very bad teeth. He still adored Anna as on the first day of their married life; he was always trying to sit beside her, and touch her surreptitiously, and he danced attendance on her with such smug infatuation that you often pitied him and felt embarrassed for him.

Before rising from the table Vera Nikolayevna mechanically counted the guests. There were thirteen of them. She was superstitious and she said to herself, "What a nuisance! Why didn't I think of counting them before? And Vasya's to blame too — he told me nothing on the telephone."

When friends gathered at Sheyin's or Friesse's they usually played poker after dinner, because both sisters were ridiculously fond of games of chance. In fact, certain rules had been established in both houses: all the players would be given an equal number of

ivory tokens of a specific value, and the game would go on until all the tokens passed to one of the players; then it would be stopped for the evening, no matter how earnestly the others insisted on continuing it. It was strictly forbidden to take fresh tokens from the cash-box. Experience had shown that these rigid rules were indispensable to check Vera and Anna, who would grow so excited in the course of the game that there was no stopping them. The total loss seldom exceeded two hundred rubles.

This time, too, they sat down to poker. Vera, who was not playing, was about to go out on to the terrace, where the table was being set for tea, when the housemaid, looking rather mysterious, suddenly called her from the drawing-room.

"What is it, Dasha?" asked Princess Vera in annoyance, passing into her little study next to the bedroom. "Why are you staring at me so stupidly? And what are you holding there?"

Dasha put on the table a small square object, neatly wrapped in white paper and tied by a pink ribbon.

"It isn't my fault, Your Highness, honest to God," she stammered, blushing offensively. "He came in and said —"

"Who is he?"

"A messenger boy, Your Highness."

"Well?"

"He came into the kitchen and put this on the table. 'Give it to your mistress,' he said. 'Only,' he say, 'be sure to hand it to her personally.' 'Who's it from?' I asked. 'It's written here,' he said. And then he ran away."

"Go and bring him back."

"Oh, but I couldn't do that, Your Highness. He came when you were in the middle of dinner, so I didn't dare to disturb you. It must have been half an hour ago."

"All right, you may go."

She cut the ribbon with scissors and threw it into the wastebasket along with the paper bearing her address. Under the wrapping she found a small jeweller's box of red plush, apparently fresh from the shop. She raised the lid, which was lined with light-blue silk, and saw, stuck into the black velvet, an oval gold bracelet, and inside it a note carefully folded into a neat octagon. Quickly she unfolded the paper. She thought she knew the handwriting, but, woman that she was, she put aside the note to take a look at the bracelet.

It was of low-standard gold, very thick but hollow and studded



on the outside with small, poorly polished old garnets. But in the centre there arose, surrounding a strange small green stone, five excellent cabochon garnets, each the size of a pea. As Vera happened to turn the bracelet at a lucky angle under the electric light, beautiful crimson lights flashed suddenly, deep under the smooth egg-shaped surface of the stones.

"It's like blood!" Vera thought with apprehension.

Then she recalled the letter. It was written in an elegant hand and ran as follows:

"Your Highness, Princess Vera Nikolayevna,

"Respectfully congratulating you on your bright and happy name-day, I take the liberty of sending to you my humble offering."

"Oh, so that's who it is," Vera said to herself resentfully. But she read the letter to the end.

"I should never have dared to offer you a present of my own choice, for I have neither the right, nor the refined taste, nor, to be frank, the money to do so. Moreover, I believe there is no treasure on earth worthy of adorning you.

"But this bracelet belonged to my great-grandmother, and my late mother was the last to wear it. In the middle, among the bigger stones, you will see a green one. It is a very rare stone — a green garnet. We have an old family tradition that this stone enables the women who wear it to foresee the future, and keeps off unhappy thoughts, and protects men from violent death.

"All the stones have been carefully transferred from the old, silver bracelet, and you may rest assured that no one has worn this bracelet before you.

"You may at once throw away this absurd trinket, or present it to someone else; I shall be happy to know that your hands have touched it.

"I beseech you not to be angry with me. I blush to remember my audacity of seven years ago, when I dared write to you, a young lady, stupid and wild letters, and even had the assurance to expect an answer to them.

"Today I have nothing for you but awe, everlasting admiration and the humble devotion of a slave. All that I can do now is to wish you perpetual happiness and to rejoice if you are happy. In my mind I bow deeply to the chair on which you sit, the floor you tread, the trees which you touch in passing, the servants

to whom you speak. I no longer presume to envy those people or things.

"Once again I beg your pardon for having bothered you with a long, useless letter.

"Your humble servant till death and after,

G. S. Zh."

"Shall I show it to Vasya or not? If so, when? Now or after the guests have left? No, I'd better do it later — now I'd look as silly as this poor man."

While debating thus with herself Princess Vera could not take her eyes off the five blood-red lights glowing inside the five garnets.

## VI

It was only with great difficulty that Colonel Ponamaryov was induced to play poker. He said that he knew nothing about the game, that he did not gamble even for fun and that the only game he cared for and had any skill in was *vint*. But in the end he gave in.

At first they had to teach and prompt him, but soon he had mastered the rules of the game, and within half an hour he had all the chips piled in front of him.

"That isn't fair!" said Anna in mock reproach. "You might have allowed us a little more of the excitement."

Vera did not know how to entertain three of the guests — Speshnikov, the colonel and the vice-governor, a doltish, respectable and dull German. She got up a game of *vint* for them and invited Gustav Ivanovich to make a fourth. Anna thanked her by lowering her eyelids, and her sister at once understood. Everybody knew that unless Gustav Ivanovich was disposed of by suggesting a game of cards he would hang about his wife all evening, baring the rotten teeth in his skull-face and making a perfect nuisance of himself.

Now things went smoothly in an easy and lively atmosphere. Vasyuchok, accompanied by Jennie Reiter, sang in an undertone Italian folk canzonettas and Oriental songs by Rubinstein. He had a small but pleasant voice, responsive and true. Jennie Reiter, a very exacting musician, was always willing to accompany him; but then it was said that he was courting her.

Sitting on a couch in a corner, Anna was flirting audaciously with the Hussar. Vera walked over and listened with a smile.

"Oh, please don't laugh," said Anna gaily, narrowing her lovely, mischievous Tatar eyes at the officer. "Of course, you think it's a feat to gallop at the head of a squadron, or to clear hurdles at races. But look at *our* feats. We've just finished a lottery. Do you think that's easy? Fie! The place was so crowded and full of tobacco smoke, there were porters and cabbies and God knows who else, and they all pestered me with complaints and grievances. I didn't have a moment's rest all day. And that isn't all, either, for now there's to be a concert in aid of needy gentlewomen, and then comes a charity ball —"

"At which you will not refuse me the mazurka, I hope?" Bakhtinsky put in and, bending slightly forward, clicked his heels under the armchair.

"Thank you. But the saddest case is our children's home. You know what I mean — a home for vicious children."

"Oh, I see. That must be very amusing."

"Don't, you should be ashamed of laughing at things like that. But do you know what the trouble is? We'd like to give shelter to those unfortunate children, whose souls are corrupted by inherited vice and bad example, we'd like to give them warmth and comfort —"

"Humph!"

"— to improve their morality, and instil in them a sense of duty. Do you see my point? And every day hundreds and thousands of children are brought to us, but there isn't a single vicious child among them! If you ask the parents whether their child is vicious they take offence — can you imagine that? And so the home has been opened and dedicated, everything is ready and waiting, but it hasn't a single inmate! We're almost at the stage of offering a prize for every vicious child brought in."

"Anna Nikolayevna," the Hussar interrupted her, with insinuating earnestness. "Why offer a prize? Take me free. Upon my honour, you couldn't find a more vicious child than I am."

"Stop it! It's impossible to talk to you seriously." She burst out laughing, and sat back on the couch, her eyes shining.

Seated at a large round table, Prince Vasily was showing his sister, Anosov and his brother-in-law a family album of cartoons drawn by himself. All four were laughing heartily, and gradually those other guests who were not playing cards gathered round them.

The album was a sort of supplement to Prince Vasily's satirical

stories — a collection of illustrations. With imperturbable calm he showed "The Story of the Amorous Adventures of the Brave General Anosov in Turkey, Bulgaria and Elsewhere", "An Adventure of Prince Nicole Boulate-Touganofski the Coxcomb in Monte Carlo", and so on.

"I'll now acquaint you, ladies and gentlemen, with a brief biography of my beloved sister, Lyudmila Lvovna," he said, with a swift teasing glance at his sister. "Part One. Childhood. The child was growing. Her name was Lima."

The album leaf displayed the figure of a little girl, purposely drawn in childish style, her face set in profile and yet showing both eyes; two broken lines sticking out from under her skirt represented her legs, and the fingers of both hands were spread out.

"Nobody ever called me Lima," said Lyudmila Lvovna with a laugh.

"Part Two. First Love. A cavalry cadet, kneeling before the damsel Lima, presents her with a poem of his own production. It contains these lines of rare beauty:

*Your gorgeous leg, I do opine,  
Is a thing of love divine!*

"And here is an original likeness of the leg.

"Here the cadet induces the innocent Lima to elope from her parents' home. Here you see them in flight. And here is a critical situation: the enraged father has overtaken the fugitives. The faint-hearted cadet leaves the meek Lima in the lurch.

*You powdered your nose in a manner so slack  
That now our pursuers are hot on our track;  
So just do your best to hold them at bay,  
While into the bushes I run away."*

The story of "the damsel Lima" was followed by one entitled "Princess Vera and the Infatuated Telegraphist".

"This moving poem is so far only in illustrations," Vasily Lvovich explained with a serious air. "The text is in the making."

"That's something new," said Anosov, "I haven't seen it before."

"It's the latest issue. First edition."

Vera gently touched his shoulder.

"Don't, please," she said.

But Vasily Lvovich did not hear, or perhaps he did not take it seriously.

"It dates from prehistoric times. One fine day in May a damsel

by the name of Vera received a letter with kissing doves on the first page. Here's the letter, and there are the doves.

"The letter contains an ardent confession of love, written against all rules of spelling. It begins: 'O Beutiful Blonde who art — a raging sea of flames seathing in my chest. Thy gaze clings to my tormented soal like a venomus serpent,' and so on. It ends in this humble way: 'I am only a poor telegrafist, but my feelings are worthy of Milord Georgy. I dare not reveel my full name — it is too indecent. I only sign my initials: P. P. Zh. Please send your anser to the post-office, poste restante.' Here, ladies and gentlemen, you can see the portrait of the telegraphist himself, very skilfully executed in crayon.

"Vera's heart was pierced (here's her heart and here's the arrow). But, as beseemed a well-behaved and good-mannered damsel, she showed the letter to her honourable parents, and also to her childhood friend and fiancé, Vasya Sheyin, a handsome young man. Here's the illustration. Given time the drawings will be supplied with explanations in verse.

"Vasya Sheyin, sobbing, returned the engagement ring to Vera. 'I will not stand in the way of your happiness,' he said, 'but, I implore you, do not be hasty. Think it over before you take the final step — test his feelings and your own. Child, you know nothing about life, and you are flying like a moth to a glowing flame. But I — alas! I know the cold, hypocritical world. You should know that telegraphists are attractive but perfidious. It gives them an indescribable pleasure to deceive an innocent victim by their proud beauty and false feelings and cruelly abandon her afterwards.'

"Six months rolled by. In the whirl of life's waltz Vera forgot her admirer and married young handsome Vasya, but the telegraphist did not forget her. One day he disguised himself as a chimney-sweep and, smearing himself with soot, made his way into Princess Vera's boudoir. You can see that he left the traces of his five fingers and two lips everywhere: on the rugs and pillows and wallpaper, and even on the floor.

"Then, dressed as a countrywoman, he took up the duties of dish-washer in our kitchen. But the excessive favour which Luka the cook bestowed upon him put him to flight.

"He found himself in a madhouse. And here you see him as a monk. But every day he unfailingly sent a passionate letter to Vera. And where his tears fell on the paper the ink ran in splotches.

"At last he died, but before his death he willed to Vera two

telegraph-office buttons and a perfume bottle filled with his tears."

"How about some tea, ladies and gentlemen?" asked Vera Nikolayevna.

## VII

The long autumn sunset was dying. The narrow crimson slit glowing on the edge of the horizon, between a bluish cloud and the earth, faded out. Now the earth, and trees and sky could no longer be seen. Overhead big stars shimmered with their eyelashes in the blackness of night, and the blue beam of the lighthouse shot upwards in a thin column that seemed to splash into a liquid, blurred circle of light as it struck the firmament. Moths fluttered against the glass hoods over the candles. In the front garden the star-shaped white flowers of the tobacco-plant gave off a stronger scent in the cool darkness.

Speshnikov, the vice-governor and Colonel Ponamaryov had left long ago, promising to send the horses back from the tramway terminus to pick up the general. The remaining guests sat on the terrace. Despite his protests General Anosov was made to put on his greatcoat, and his feet were wrapped in a warm rug. He sat between the two sisters, with a bottle of his favourite Pommard claret in front of him. They waited on him eagerly, filling his thin glass with the heavy, thick wine, passing the matches, cutting cheese for him, and so on. The old general all but purred with bliss.

"Yes, autumn's coming," said the old man, gazing at the candle-light and thoughtfully shaking his head. "Autumn. And I must start packing up. What a pity! It would have been so nice to stay here at the seaside in ease and quiet, now that the weather's so fine!"

"Why not do so, Grandad?" said Vera.

"I can't, my dear, I can't. Duty calls. My leave is over. But I certainly wish I could. How the roses smell! I can feel it from here. And in summer the flowers somehow had no scent, except the white acacias — and they smelled of sweets."

Vera took two little roses — pink and carmine — out of a small jug and stuck them into the buttonhole of the general's greatcoat.

"Thanks, Vera dear." He bent his head to smell the flowers, and smiled the friendly smile of a kind old man.

"I remember when we took up our quarters in Bucharest. One day as I was walking down the street there came a strong smell

of roses. I stopped and saw two soldiers, with a fine cut-glass bottle of attar standing between them. They had already oiled their boots and rifle-locks with it. 'What's that you've got?' I asked. 'It's some sort of oil, sir. We put some of it in our gruel but it's no good — rasps the tongue — but it smells all right.' I gave them a ruble and they gladly let me have it. The bottle was no more than half-full, but considering the high price of the stuff it would fetch at least two hundred rubles. The soldiers were quite content, and they said, 'Here's another thing, sir. Peas of some kind. We tried hard to boil them, but the accursed stuff won't get soft.' It was coffee-beans; so I told them, 'That's only good for the Turks — it's of no use to soldiers.' Fortunately they hadn't eaten any opium. In some places I had seen opium tablets trampled into the mud."

"Tell us frankly, Grandad," said Anna, "did you ever know fear in battle? Were you afraid?"

"How strangely you talk, Anna. Of course I was afraid. Please don't believe those who say they weren't afraid and think the whizzing of bullets the sweetest music on earth. Only cranks or braggards can talk like that. Everybody's afraid, only some shake in their boots with fear, while others keep themselves in hand. And though fear always remains the same, the ability to keep cool improves with practice; hence all the heroes and brave men. That's how it is. But once I was frightened almost to death."

"Tell us about it, Grandad," both sisters begged in unison.

They still listened to Anosov's stories with the same rapture as in their early childhood. Anna had spread out her elbows on the table quite like a child, propping her chin on her cupped hands. There was a sort of cosy charm about his unhurried, simple narrative. The somewhat bookish words and figures of speech which he used in telling his war memories sounded strange and clumsy. You would have thought he was imitating some nice ancient story-teller.

"It's a very short story," he responded. "It happened at Shipka in winter, after I was shell-shocked. There were four of us in our dug-out. That was when something terrible befell me. One morning when I rose from bed, I fancied I was Nikolai and not Yakov, and I couldn't undeceive myself, much as I tried. Sensing that my mind was becoming deranged, I shouted for some water to be brought to me, wet my head with it, and recovered my reason."

"I can imagine how many victories you won over women there, Yakov Mikhailovich," said Jennie Reiter, the pianist. "You must have been very handsome in your youth."

"Oh, but our Grandad is handsome even now!" cried Anna.

"I wasn't handsome," said Anosov, with a calm smile. "But I wasn't shunned, either. There was a moving incident in Bucharest. When we marched into the city, the people welcomed us in the main square with gunfire, which damaged many windows; but where glasses of water had been placed on the window-sills the windows were unharmed. This is how I learned that. Coming to the lodgings assigned to me, I saw on the window-sill a low cage and on the cage a large cut-glass bottle with clear water that had goldfish swimming in it, and a canary perched among them. A canary in water! I was greatly surprised, but inspecting it I saw that the bottle had a broad bottom with a deep hollow in it, so that the canary could easily fly in and perch there.

"I walked into the house and saw a very pretty Bulgarian girl. I showed her my admission slip and took the opportunity to ask her why the panes in the house were undamaged after the gunfire, and she told me it was because of the water. She also told me about the canary; how dull-witted I had been! While we were talking, our eyes met, a spark flew between us like electricity, and I felt that I had fallen headlong in love — passionately and irrevocably."

The old man paused and slowly sipped the black wine.

"But you confessed it to her afterwards, didn't you?" asked the pianist.

"Well, yes, of course. But I did it without words. This is how it came about —"

"I hope you won't make us blush, Grandad?" Anna remarked, smiling slyly.

"Not at all, the affair was perfectly respectable. You see, the townspeople didn't give us the same welcome everywhere, but in Bucharest the people were so easy-going with us that one day when I started playing a violin the girls at once came in their Sunday dresses and began to dance, and then it became a daily habit.

"On an evening like that, when the moon was shining, I went into the passage where my Bulgarian girl had disappeared. On seeing me she pretended to be picking dry rose petals, which, incidentally, are gathered there by the sackful. But I put my arms round her, held her close to my heart and kissed her several times.

"From then on, when the moon and stars came out in the sky, I would hurry to my beloved and forget the day's worries while I was with her. And when the time came for us to march on we swore eternal love, and parted for ever."



"Is that all?" asked Lyudmila Lvovna, disappointed.

"What else did you expect?" replied the general.

"You will pardon me for saying so, Yakov Mikhailovich, but that isn't love — it's just an army officer's camp adventure."

"I don't know, really, whether it was love or some other sentiment."

"What I mean is, have you never known genuine love? A love that — well, in short, the kind of love that is holy and pure and eternal — and unearthly — Have you never experienced love like that?"

"I can't tell, honestly," faltered the old man, rising from his armchair. "I suppose not. At first, when I was young, I had no time, what with merry-making and cards and war. It seemed as if life and youth and good health would last for ever. Then I looked back and saw that I was already an old wreck. And now, Vera dear, please don't keep me any longer. I'll say goodbye to you all. Hussar," he said to Bakhtinsky, "the night is warm, let's go and meet our carriage."

"I'll go with you, Grandad," said Vera.

"So will I," added Anna.

Before leaving Vera stepped up to her husband.

"There's a red case in my drawer," she said to him softly. "In it you'll find a letter. Read it."

## VIII

Anna and Bakhtinsky led the way, followed at some twenty paces by the general arm in arm with Vera. The night was so black that during the first few minutes, before their eyes got used to the darkness, they had to grope for the way with their feet. Anosov, who despite his age still boasted surprisingly keen eyesight, had to help his companion. From time to time his big cold hand fondly stroked Vera's hand, which lay lightly on the bend of his sleeve.

"She's a funny woman, that Lyudmila Lvovna," he said suddenly, as if continuing aloud the thoughts that had been going through his head. "I've seen it so often in my life: as soon as a lady gets past fifty, especially if she's a widow or a spinster, she longs to hang about somebody else's love. She either spies, gloats and gossips, or offers to take care of your happiness, or works up a lot of treacly talk about exalted love. But I would say that nowadays

people no longer know how to love. I see no real love. Nor did I see any in my time!"

"How can that be, Grandad?" Vera objected as she squeezed his arm slightly. "What slander! You were married yourself, weren't you? Then you must have loved."

"It doesn't mean a thing, Vera. Do you know how I got married? She was a peach of a girl, young and fresh, and she would sit by my side, her bosom heaving under the blouse. She'd lower her beautiful long eyelashes, and blush suddenly. The skin of her cheeks was so delicate, her neck so white and innocent, and her hands so soft and warm. God! Her papa and mamma slunk about us, eavesdropped at the door, and looked wistfully at me — with the gaze of faithful dogs. And I'd get little swift pecks when I was leaving. At tea her foot would touch mine as if by chance. Well, they got me before I knew where I was. 'Dear Nikita Antonovich, I have come to ask you for the hand of your daughter. Believe me, this angel —' Before I had finished the papa's eyes were moist, and he started to kiss me. 'My dear boy! I guessed it long ago... May God keep you... Only take good care of our treasure!' Three months later the angelic treasure was going about the house in a shabby dressing-gown and slippers on her bare feet, her thin hair unkempt and hung with curl-papers. She wrangled with orderlies like a fishwife and made a fool of herself with young officers, lisping, giggling, rolling her eyes. In the presence of others she for some reason called me Jacques, pronouncing it with a languid, long-drawn nasal twang, 'Oh, Ja-a-acques'. A spendthrift and a humbug, slovenly and greedy. And her eyes were always so insincere. It's all over now, finished and done with. I'm even grateful to that wretched actor. It was lucky we had no children."

"Did you forgive them, Grandad?"

"'Forgive' isn't the word, Vera dear. At first I was like a madman. If I'd seen them then I'd certainly have killed both. Then the whole thing gradually wore off, and nothing was left but contempt. So much the better. God warded off useless bloodshed. Besides, I was spared the lot of most husbands. Indeed, what would have become of me if it hadn't been for that disgusting incident? A pack-camel, a despicable abettor and protector, a milch cow, a screen, some sort of household utensil. No! It's all for the best, Vera."

"No, no, Grandad, the old grievance still rankles in your heart, if you'll allow me to say so. And you extend your own unhappy

experience to all mankind. Take Vasya and me. You couldn't call our marriage an unhappy one, could you?"

Anosov did not speak for a while.

"All right, let's say your case is an exception," he said at length reluctantly. "But why do people generally get married? Let's take the woman. She's ashamed of remaining single, especially after all her friends have married. It's unbearable to be a burden on the family. She wants to be mistress of the house, mother of a family, enjoy independence. Then there's the need — the outright physical need — for motherhood, and for making a nest of her own. Men's motives are different. First of all they get sick of their bachelor life, the disorder in their rooms, restaurant meals, dirt, cigarette ends, torn or unmatching linen, debts, unceremonious friends, and so on, and so forth. Secondly, they feel that it's healthier and more economical to live in a family. In the third place, they think that after they've died, a part of them will be left in their children — an illusion of immortality. In the fourth place, there's the temptation of innocence, as in my case. And sometimes there is the consideration of a nice dowry. But where does love come in? Disinterested, self-sacrificing love that expects no reward? The love said to be 'stronger than death'? I mean that kind of love for which it's not an effort but sheer joy to perform any feat, give your life, accept martyrdom. Wait, Vera, are you going to talk to me about your Vasya again? Believe me, I like him. He's all right. Who knows if the future may not show his love in a light of great beauty. But try to understand what kind of love I am talking about. Love must be a tragedy. The greatest mystery in the world! No comforts, calculations or compromises must affect it."

"Have you ever seen such love, Grandad?" Vera asked softly.

"No," the old man replied firmly. "I know of two instances that come close to it. But one of them was prompted by stupidity, and the other — it was — a kind of sour stuff — utterly idiotic. I can tell you about them if you like. It won't take long."

"Please do, Grandad."

"All right. A regimental commander in our division — but not in our regiment — had a wife. She was a regular scarecrow, I must tell you. She was bony, red-haired, long-legged, scraggy, big-mouthed. Her make-up used to peel off her face like plaster off an old Moscow house. But, for all that, she was a kind of regimental Messalina, with a lot of spirit, arrogance, contempt for

people, a passion for variety, and she was a morphine addict into the bargain.

"One day in autumn a new ensign was sent to our regiment, a greenhorn fresh from military school. A month later that old jade had him under her thumb. He was her page, her slave, her eternal dance partner. He used to carry her fan and handkerchief and rush out in snow and frost to get her horses, with nothing on but his flimsy coat. It's awful when an innocent lad lays his first love at the feet of an old, experienced, ambitious debauchee. Even if he manages to get away unscathed, you must give him up for lost just the same. He's marked for life.

"By Christmas she was fed up with him. She fell back on one of her previous, tried and tested beaux. But he couldn't do without her. He trailed after her like a shadow. He was worn out and lost weight and colour. In high-flown language, 'death had marked his brow'. He was terribly jealous of her. They said that he used to stand under her window all night long.

"One day in spring they got up a kind of picnic in the regiment. I knew the two personally, but I was not there when it happened. As usual on such occasions, a lot was drunk. They started back after nightfall, along the railway. Suddenly they saw a goods train coming. It was creeping up a rather steep incline. They heard whistles. And the moment the headlights of the engine came alongside she suddenly whispered in the ensign's ear, 'You keep telling me you love me. But if I tell you to throw yourself under this train I'm sure you won't do it.' He didn't say a word in reply, but just rushed under the train. They say he had worked it out well, and meant to drop between the front and back wheels, where he would have been neatly cut in two. But some idiot tried to keep him back and push him away. Only he wasn't strong enough. The ensign clung to the rail with both his hands and they were chopped off."

"How dreadful!" Vera exclaimed.

"He had to resign from military service. His comrades collected a little money for his journey. He couldn't very well stay in a town where he was a living reproach both to her and to the entire regiment. And that was the end of the poor chap — he became a beggar, and then froze to death somewhere on a St. Petersburg pier.

"The second case was quite a pitiful one. The woman was just like the other, except that she was young and pretty. Her behaviour

was most reprehensible. Light as we made of domestic affairs like that, we were shocked. But her husband didn't mind. He knew and saw everything but did nothing to stop it. His friends gave him hints, but he waved them away. 'Cut it out. It's no business of mine. All I want is for Lena to be happy.' Such a fool!

"In the end she got herself seriously involved with Lieutenant Vishnyakov, a subaltern from their company. And the three of them lived in two-husband wedlock, as if it were the most lawful kind of matrimony. Then our regiment was ordered to the front. Our ladies saw us off, and so did she, but, really, it was sickening: she didn't so much as glance at her husband, at least to keep up appearances if for no other reason. Instead she hung on her lieutenant like ivy on a rotten wall, and wouldn't leave him for a second. By way of farewell, when we were settled in the train and the train started, the hussy shouted after her husband, 'See that you take good care of Volodya! If anything happens to him I'll leave the house and never come back. And I'll take the children with me.'

"Perhaps you imagine the captain was a ninny? A jelly-fish? A sissy? Not at all. He was a brave soldier. At Zelyoniye Gory he led his company against a Turkish redoubt six times, and of his two hundred men only fourteen were left. He was wounded twice, but refused to go to the medical station. That's what he was like. The soldiers worshipped him.

"But *she* had told him what to do. His Lena had!

"And so, like a nurse or a mother, he took care of that coward and idler Vishnyakov, that lazy drone. At night in camp, in rain and mud, he'd wrap him in his own greatcoat. He would supervise the sappers' job for him, while he lounged in a dug-out or played faro. At night he'd inspect the outposts for Vishnyakov. And that was at a time, mark you, when the Turks used to cut down our pickets as easily as a Yaroslavl countrywoman cuts down her cabbages. It's a sin to say so, but, upon my honour, everybody was happy to learn that Vishnyakov had died of typhus in hospital."

"How about women, Grandad? Have you never met loving women?"

"Of course I have, Vera. I'll say more: I'm sure that almost every woman in love is capable of sublime heroism. Don't you see, from the moment she kisses, embraces, gives herself, she is a *mother*. Love to her, if she does love, is the whole meaning of life — the whole universe! But it is no fault of hers that love has assumed such vulgar forms and degenerated into a sort of everyday convenience, a little diversion. The ones to blame are the men,

who are surfeited at twenty, who have a chicken's body and a rabbit's heart, and are incapable of strong desires, heroic deeds, the tenderness and worship of love. They say real love did exist at one time. If not, then isn't it what the best minds and souls of the world — poets, novelists, musicians, artists — have dreamt of and longed for? The other day I read the story of Manon Lescaut and Cavalier des Grieux. It brought tears to my eyes — it really did. Tell me in all honesty, doesn't every woman dream, deep in her heart, of such a love — a single-minded, all-forgiving love ready to bear anything, modest and self-sacrificing?"

"Of course she does, Grandad."

"And since it isn't there women take their revenge. In another thirty years or so from now — I shan't live to see it, Vera dear, but you may; remember what I'm telling you — some thirty years from now women will wield unprecedented power in the world. They will dress like Indian idols. They'll trample us men underfoot as contemptible, grovelling slaves. Their extravagant wishes and whims will become painful laws for us. And all because over generations we've been unable to worship and revere love. It will be a vengeance. You know the law: action and reaction are equal and opposite."

He paused a while, then asked suddenly, "Tell me, Vera, if only you don't find it embarrassing, what was that story about a telegraphist which Prince Vasily told us tonight? How much of it is fact and how much his usual embellishment?"

"Do you really wish to know, Grandad?"

"Only if you care to tell me, Vera. If for some reason you'd rather not —"

"Not at all. I'll tell you with pleasure."

And she told the general in detail about a crazy man who had begun to pursue her with his love two years before her marriage.

She had never seen him, and did not know his name. He had only written to her, signing *G. S. Zh.* Once he had mentioned that he was a clerk in some office — he had not said a word about the telegraph office. He was apparently watching her movements closely, because in his letters he always mentioned very accurately where she had spent this or that evening and in what company, and how she had been dressed. At first his letters sounded vulgar and ludicrously ardent, although they were quite proper. But once she wrote to ask him — "by the way, Grandad, don't let

that out to our people: nobody knows it" — not to annoy her any more with his protestations of love. From then on he wrote no more about love and sent her only an occasional letter — at Easter, on New Year's Eve, and on her birthday. Princess Vera also told the general about that day's parcel and gave him almost word for word the strange letter from her mysterious admirer.

"Y-es," the general drawled at last. "Perhaps he's just an addle-head, a maniac, or — who knows? — perhaps the path of your life has been crossed by the very kind of love that women dream about and men are no longer capable of. Just a moment. Do you see lights moving ahead? That must be my carriage."

At the same time they heard behind them the blare of a motor-car and the road, rutted by wheels, shone in a white acetylene light. Gustav Ivanovich drove up.

"I've taken your things with me, Anna. Get in," he said. "May I give you a lift, Your Excellency?"

"No, thank you, my friend," answered the general. "I don't like that engine. All it does is shake and stink — there's no pleasure in it. Well, good night, Vera dear. I'll be coming often now," he said, kissing Vera's forehead and hands.

There were goodbyes all round. Friesse drove Vera Nikolayevna to the gate of her villa and, swiftly describing a circle, shot off into the darkness in his roaring, puffing motor-car.

## IX

With a disagreeable feeling Princess Vera stepped on to the terrace and walked into the house. From a distance she heard the loud voice of her brother Nikolai and saw his gaunt figure darting back and forth across the room. Vasily Lvovich sat at the card table, his large head with the cropped tow hair bent low as he traced lines on the green cloth with a piece of chalk.

"It should have been done long ago!" said Nikolai irritably, making a gesture with his right hand as if he were throwing down some invisible burden. "I was convinced long ago that an end should have been put to those foolish letters. Vera wasn't yet your wife when I told you that you and she ought not to make fun of them like children, seeing only what was laughable in them. Here's Vera herself, by the way. Vasily Lvovich and I were talking about that madman of yours, P. P. Zh. I consider the correspondence insolent and vulgar."

"There was no correspondence," Sheyin interrupted him coldly. "He was the only one who wrote."

Vera blushed at that and sat down on the sofa in the shade of a large fan palm.

"I'm sorry," said Nikolai Nikolayevich, and threw down the invisible heavy object, as if he had torn it from his chest.

"I wonder why you call him mine," Vera put in, heartened by her husband's support. "He's mine as much as he's yours."

"All right, I'm sorry again. In short, what I mean is that we must put an end to his foolishness. I think this matter is getting beyond the stage where we may just laugh and draw funny pictures. Believe me that what I'm concerned about is Vera's reputation and yours, Vasily Lvovich."

"I think you're exaggerating, Kolya," replied Sheyin.

"Perhaps I am. But you risk finding yourself quite easily in a ridiculous position."

"I don't see how," said the prince.

"Suppose this idiotic bracelet" — Nikolai lifted the red case from the table and at once threw it down again with disgust — "this monstrous thing remains in our house, or we throw it out or present it to Dasha. Then, first of all, P. P. Zh. will be able to brag to his acquaintances or friends that Princess Vera Nikolayevna Sheyina accepts his gifts, and, secondly, the first opportunity will encourage him to further exploits. Tomorrow he may send her a diamond ring, the day after a pearl necklace, and then, for all we know, he may land in the dock for embezzlement or fraud and Prince and Princess Sheyin will be summoned to testify as witnesses. A nice prospect, eh?"

"The bracelet must certainly be sent back!" cried Vasily Lvovich.

"I think so too," Vera assented, "and the sooner the better. But how are we to do it? We don't know the name or address."

"Oh, that's child's play," Nikolai Nikolayevich replied carelessly. "We know the initials of this P. P. Zh. Is that what they are, Vera?"

"G. S. Zh."

"Very good. Besides, we know that he's employed somewhere. That's quite enough. Tomorrow I'll take the town directory and look up an official or clerk with those initials. If I don't find him for some reason, I'll simply call a detective and get him to trace the man for me. In case of difficulty I'll have this paper here with his handwriting. In short, by two o'clock tomorrow I'll know the exact name and address of the fellow and even the hours



when he's in. And then we'll not only give him back his treasure tomorrow but will also see that he never reminds us of his existence again."

"What are you going to do?" asked Prince Vasily.

"What? I'm going to call on the governor."

"Not the governor — please! You know what terms we're on with him. We'd only make ourselves ridiculous."

"All right. I'll go to the chief of police. He's a club-mate of mine. Let him summon that Romeo and shake his finger under the man's nose. Do you know how he does it? He brings his finger close to your nose but doesn't move his hand — he just wags his finger and bawls, 'I won't stand for this, sir!'"

"Fie! Fancy dealing with the police!" said Vera, pulling a wry face.

"You're right, Vera," the prince agreed. "We'd better not drag any outsiders into this. There'd be rumours and gossip. We all know what our town is like. One might as well live in a glass jar. I think I had better go to that — er — young man myself! God knows, he may be sixty. I'll hand him the bracelet and give him a talking to."

"Then I'll go with you," Nikolai Nikolayevich cut in. "You're too soft. Leave it to me to talk with him. And now, my friends" — he pulled out his watch and glanced at it — "you'll excuse me if I go to my room. I can't hardly stand on my feet, and I have two files to look through."

"Somehow I feel sorry for that unfortunate man," said Vera hesitantly.

"No reason to feel sorry for him!" Nikolai retorted, turning in the doorway. "If anyone of our own class had played that trick with the bracelet and letter Prince Vasily would have sent him a challenge. Or if he hadn't I would. In the old days I'd simply have had him flogged in the stable. You'll wait for me in your office tomorrow, Vasily Lvovich. I'll telephone you."

## X

The filthy staircase smelled of mice, cats, paraffin-oil, and washing. Before they had reached the fifth floor Prince Vasily Lvovich halted.

"Wait a bit," he said to his brother-in-law. "Let me catch my breath. Oh, Kolya, we shouldn't have come here."

They climbed another two flights. It was so dark on the stairs

that Nikolai Nikolayevich had to strike two matches before he made out the number of the flat.

He rang and was answered by a stout, white-haired, grey-eyed woman wearing spectacles, and slightly bent forward, apparently as a result of some disease.

"Is Mr. Zheltkov in?" asked Nikolai Nikolayevich.

The woman's eyes looked in alarm from one to the other and back. The two men's respectable appearance seemed to reassure her.

"Yes, won't you come in?" she said, stepping back. "First door on your left."

Bulat-Tuganovsky knocked three times, briefly and firmly. There was a barely audible sound behind the door.

He knocked again.

"Come in," a faint voice responded.

The room had a very low ceiling, but it was very wide — almost square in shape. Its two round windows, which looked very much like portholes, let in little light. In fact, it was rather like the mess-room of a cargo ship. Against one of the walls stood a narrow bedstead, against another was a broad sofa covered with an excellent but worn Turkoman rug, and in the middle stood a table spread with a coloured Ukrainian cloth.

At first the visitors could not see the occupant's face, for he stood with his back to the light, rubbing his hands in perplexity. He was tall and thin, with long, silky hair.

"Mr. Zheltkov, if I'm not mistaken?" Nikolai Nikolayevich asked haughtily.

"Yes, that's my name. Very glad to meet you."

Holding out his hand, he took two paces towards Tuganovsky. But Nikolai Nikolayevich turned to Sheyin as if he had not noticed the gesture of welcome.

"I told you we weren't mistaken."

Zheltkov's slim, nervous fingers ran up and down the front of his short brown jacket, buttoning and unbuttoning it. At last he said with an effort, pointing to the sofa and bowing awkwardly, "Pray be seated."

He had now come into full view, a man with a very pallid, delicate girl's face, blue eyes and a cleft chin like a wilful child's; he looked somewhere between thirty and thirty-five.

"Thank you," said Prince Sheyin, who had been scanning him with keen interest.

"*Merci*," Nikolai Nikolayevich answered briefly. And both remained

standing. "It'll only take us a few minutes. This is Prince Vasily Lvovich Sheyin, the marshal of nobility in this province. My name is Mirza-Bulat-Tuganovsky. I'm assistant public prosecutor. The business which we shall have the honour to discuss with you concerns in equal measure the prince and myself, or, to be exact, concerns the prince's wife, who is my sister."

Completely dazed, Zheltkov sank down on the sofa and stammered through blanched lips, "Please, sit down, gentlemen." But, apparently recalling that he had already suggested that, he jumped up, rushed to the window, tousling his hair, and came back again. And once more his trembling hands ran up and down, tugging at his buttons, plucking his light-coloured, reddish moustache, and touching his face.

"I am at your service, Your Highness," he said in a hollow voice, with an entreating gaze at Vasily Lvovich.

But Sheyin made no reply. It was Nikolai Nikolayevich who spoke.

"First of all, may I return something that belongs to you," he said, and, taking the red case from his pocket, he carefully put it down on the table. "To be sure, it does credit to your taste, but we earnestly request that no further surprises of this kind shall be sprung on us."

"Please forgive me. I know I'm very much at fault," whispered Zheltkov, blushing, his eyes on the floor. "Wouldn't you like a glass of tea?"

"You see, Mr. Zheltkov," Nikolai Nikolayevich went on, as if he had not heard Zheltkov's last words. "I'm very glad to see you are a gentleman, who can take a hint. I believe we shall reach agreement promptly. If I'm not mistaken, you have been pursuing Princess Vera Nikolayevna for the last seven or eight years?"

"Yes," answered Zheltkov softly, and lowered his eyelashes in awe.

"But so far we haven't taken any action against you, although you'll concede that we could and, indeed, *should* have done so. Don't you agree?"

"Yes."

"Yes. But by your last act, namely, by sending this garnet bracelet, you overstepped the limit of our forbearance. Do you understand? — the limit. I shall not conceal from you that our first thought was to refer the matter to the authorities, but we didn't do so, and I'm glad we didn't, because — I'll say it again — I saw at once that you are an honourable man."

"I beg your pardon. What was that you said?" Zheltkov asked

suddenly, and laughed. "You were about to refer the matter to the authorities? Did I understand you rightly?"

He put his hands in his pockets, made himself comfortable in a corner of the sofa, took out this cigarette-case and matches, and lighted a cigarette.

"So you said you were about to refer the matter to the authorities? You will pardon my sitting, Prince?" he said to Sheyin. "Well, go on."

The prince pulled a chair up to the table and sat down. Mystified and eager, he gazed fixedly at the face of the strange man.

"It's open to us to take that step at any time, my good man," Nikolai Nikolayevich continued, with some insolence. "Butting into a stranger's family — "

"I beg to interrupt you — "

"No, I beg to interrupt *you*," all but shouted the assistant prosecutor.

"As you wish. Go on. I'm listening. But I want a word with Prince Vasily Lvovich."

And paying no more attention to Tuganovsky, he said, "This is the most difficult moment of my life. And I must speak without any regard for convention. Will you listen to me?"

"I'm listening," said Sheyin. "Be quiet, Kolya, please!" he said impatiently as he saw Tuganovsky make an angry gesture. "Yes!"

For a few seconds Zheltkov's breathing came in choking gasps, and suddenly he burst out in a torrent of words. He spoke with only his jaws; his lips were a ghastly white, and rigid like a dead man's.

"It's hard to utter those words — to say that I love your wife. But seven years of hopeless and unassuming love give me some right to it. I'll own that at first, while Vera Nikolayevna was still unmarried, I wrote her foolish letters and even expected her to answer them. I agree that my last step, namely, sending the bracelet, was an even more foolish thing to do. But — I look you straight in the eyes and I feel that you'll understand me. I know it's beyond my power ever to stop loving her. Tell me, Prince — supposing you resent the whole thing — tell me what you would do to break off that feeling? Would you have me transported to some other town, as Nikolai Nikolayevich suggested? But there I would go on loving Vera Nikolayevna as much as I do here. Put me in jail? But there, too, I'd find means to remind her of my existence. So the only solution is death. If you so desire I'll accept death in any form."

"Instead of talking business, here we are up to our necks in melodrama," said Nikolai Nikolayevich, putting on his hat. "The point is

quite clear: either you cease completely pursuing Princess Vera Nikolayevna or, if you don't, we shall take such measures as are available to men of our standing, our influence, and so on."

But Zheltkov did not so much as glance at him, although he had heard him. Instead he asked Prince Vasily Lvovich, "Would you mind my leaving you for ten minutes? I'll admit that I'm going to speak to Princess Vera Nikolayevna on the telephone. I assure you I will report to you as much of the conversation as I can."

"All right," said Sheyin.

Left alone with his brother-in-law, Nikolai Nikolayevich set upon him at once.

"This won't do," he shouted, his right hand as usual throwing down some invisible object from his chest. "This just won't do. I warned you I would take care of the matter. But you turned sloppy and gave him a chance to enlarge on his feelings. I'd have put everything in two words."

"Wait," said Prince Vasily Lvovich, "everything will be cleared up in a moment. The important thing is, I think he has the face of a man who is unable to deceive or lie deliberately. But is it his fault that he's in love? And how can you control a feeling like love, which people still can't account for?" He paused thoughtfully, and added, "I feel sorry for the man. Moreover, I feel as if I'm looking at a tremendous tragedy of the soul, and I can't behave like a clown."

"I call that decadence," said Nikolai Nikolayevich.

Ten minutes later Zheltkov came back. His eyes were shining and deep, as if they were filled with unshed tears. And it was obvious that he had quite forgotten about his good manners, about who should sit where, and had stopped behaving like a gentleman. And once again Prince Sheyin understood the reason with great sensitiveness.

"I'm ready," he said. "From tomorrow you'll hear nothing more of me. For you, I'm as good as dead. But there's one condition — I say this to *you*, Prince Vasily Lvovich — I've embezzled money and I must fly from this town anyway. Will you permit me to write a last letter to Princess Vera Nikolayevna?"

"No. If it's finished, it's finished. No letters!" shouted Nikolai Nikolayevich.

"All right, you may," said Sheyin.

"That's all," said Zheltkov, smiling haughtily. "You'll hear no more of me, let alone see me. Princess Vera Nikolayevna didn't want to speak to me at all. When I asked her if I might remain in town so as to see her at least occasionally — without being seen by her, of course — she

said, 'If only you knew how tired I am of the whole business! Please stop it as soon as you can.' And so I'm stopping the whole business. I think I've done all I could, haven't I?"

Coming back to the villa that evening, Vasily Lvovich told his wife in detail about his interview with Zheltkov. He seemed to feel it was his duty to do that.

Vera was worried, but not surprised or bewildered. Later that night, when her husband came into her bed, she suddenly turned away to the wall and said, "Leave me alone — I know that man is going to kill himself."

## XI

Princess Vera Nikolayevna never read the newspapers because, firstly, they dirtied her hands, and, secondly, she could never make head or tail of the language which they use nowadays.

But fate willed it that she should open the page and come upon the column which carried this news:

"A Mysterious Death. G. S. Zheltkov, an employee of the Board of Control, committed suicide about seven o'clock last night. According to evidence given at the inquest, his death was prompted by an embezzlement. He left a note to that effect. Since testimony furnished by witnesses has established that he died by his own hand, it has been decided not to order a postmortem."

Vera thought, "Why did I feel it was coming? Precisely this tragic finale? And what was it: love or madness?"

All day long she wandered about the flower-garden and the orchard. The anxiety growing in her from minute to minute made her restless. And all her thoughts were riveted on the unknown man whom she had never seen, and would hardly ever see — that ridiculous "P. P. Zh."

"Who knows? Perhaps a real, self-sacrificing, true love has crossed the path of your life," she recalled what Anosov had said.

At six o'clock the postman came. This time Vera Nikolayevna recognized Zheltkov's handwriting, and she unfolded the letter with greater tenderness than she would have expected of herself.

This was what Zheltkov wrote:

"It is not my fault, Vera Nikolayevna, that God willed to send to me, as an enormous happiness, love for you. I happen not to be

interested in anything like politics, science, philosophy, or man's future happiness; to me life is centred in you alone. Now I realize that I have thrust myself into your life like an embarrassing wedge. Please forgive me for that if you can. I am leaving today and shall never come back, and there will be nothing to remind you of me.

"I am immensely grateful to you just because you exist. I have examined myself, and I know it is not a disease, not the obsession of a maniac — it is love with which God has chosen to reward me for some reason.

"I may have appeared ridiculous to you and your brother, Nikolai Nikolayevich. As I depart I say in ecstasy, '*Hallowed be thy name.*'

"Eight years ago I saw you in a circus box, and from the very first second I said to myself: I love her because there is nothing on earth like her, nothing better, no animal, no plant, no star, because no human being is more beautiful than she, or more delicate. The whole beauty of the earth seemed to be embodied in you.

"What was I to do? Fly to some other town? But my heart was always beside you, at your feet, at every moment it was filled with you, with thoughts of you, with dreams of you, with a sweet madness. I am very much ashamed of and blush in my mind for that foolish bracelet — well, it cannot be helped; it was a mistake. I can imagine the impression it made on your guests.

"I shall be gone in ten minutes from now. I shall just have time to stick a postage stamp on this letter and drop it into a box, so as not to ask anyone else to do it. Please burn this letter. I have just heated the stove and am burning all that was precious to me in life: your handkerchief which, I confess, I stole. You left it on a chair at a ball in the Noblemen's Assembly. Your note — oh, how I kissed it! — in which you forbade me to write to you. A programme of an art exhibition, which you once held in your hand and left forgotten on a chair by the entrance. It is finished. I have cut off everything, but still I believe, and even feel confident, that you will think of me. If you do — I know you are very musical, for I saw you mostly at performances of the Beethoven quartets — if you do think of me, please play, or get someone else to play, the Sonata in D-dur No. 2, op. 2.

"I wonder how I shall close my letter. I thank you from the bottom of my heart because you have been my only joy in life, my only comfort, my sole thought. May God give you happiness, and may nothing transient or commonplace disturb your wonderful soul. I kiss your hands.

"G. S. Zh."

She went to her husband, her eyes red with crying and her lips swollen, and, showing him the letter, she said, "I don't want to conceal anything from you, but I have a feeling that something terrible has come into our life. You and Nikolai Nikolayevich probably didn't handle the matter properly."

Prince Sheyin read the letter with deep attention, folded it carefully, and said after a long pause, "I don't doubt this man's sincerity, and what's more, I don't think I have a right to analyze his feelings towards you."

"Is he dead?" asked Vera.

"Yes, he's dead. I think he loved you and wasn't mad at all. I watched him all the time and saw his every movement, every change in his face. There was no life for him without you. I felt as if I were witnessing a tremendous agony, and I almost realized that I was dealing with a dead man. You see, Vera, I didn't know how to behave or what to do."

"Look here, Vasya," she interrupted him. "Would it pain you if I went to town to take a look at him?"

"No, no, Vera, please go. I'd like to go myself, but Nikolai's bungled the whole thing. I'm afraid I should feel awkward."

## XII

Vera Nikolayevna left her carriage two blocks off Luteranskaya Street. She found Zheltkov's flat without much difficulty. She was met by the same grey-eyed old woman, very stout and wearing silver-rimmed spectacles, who asked as she had done the day before,

"Who do you wish to see?"

"Mr. Zheltkov," said the princess.

Her costume — her hat and gloves — and her rather peremptory tone apparently impressed the landlady. She began to talk.

"Please step in, it's the first door on your left, and there — he is — He left us so soon. Well, suppose he did embezzle money. He should have told me about it. You know we don't make much by letting rooms to bachelors. But if it was a matter of six or seven hundred rubles I could have scraped it together to pay for him. If only you knew, madam, what a wonderful man he was. He had been my lodger for eight years, but he was more like a son to me."

There was a chair in the passage, and Vera sank down upon it.

"I'm a friend of your late lodger," she said carefully choosing her words. "Please tell me something about his last minutes, about what he said and did."



"Two gentlemen came to see him, madam, and had a very long talk with him. Then he told me they'd offered him the position of bailiff on an estate. Then Mr. George ran out to telephone and came back so happy. And then the two gentlemen left, but he sat down and began writing a letter. Then he went out to post the letter and then we heard something like a shot from a toy pistol. We paid no attention to it. He always had tea at seven o'clock. Lukerya, the maid, went to knock at his door, but he didn't answer, and she knocked again and again. We had to force the door, and there he lay dead."

"Tell me something about the bracelet," Vera Nikolayevna commanded.

"Ah, the bracelet — I quite forgot. How do you know about it? Before writing the letter he came to me and said, 'Are you a Catholic?' 'Yes,' I said. Then he says, 'You have a nice custom' — that was what he said — 'a nice custom of hanging rings, necklaces, and gifts on the image of the Holy Virgin. So won't you please hang this bracelet on your icon?' I promised."

"Will you let me see him?" asked Vera.

"Of course, madam. There's his door, the first on the left. They were going to take him to the dissecting-room today, but he has a brother who asked permission to give him a Christian burial. Please come."

Vera braced herself and opened the door. The room smelled of incense, and three wax candles were burning in it. Zheltkov was lying on the table, placed diagonally. His head rested on a very low support — a small soft cushion that someone seemed to have pushed under it purposely, because that did not make any difference to a corpse. His closed eyes suggested deep gravity, and his lips were set in a blissful, serene smile, as if before parting with life he had learned some deep, sweet mystery that had solved the whole riddle of his life. She remembered having seen the same peaceful expression on the death-masks of two great martyrs, Pushkin and Napoleon.

"Would you like me to leave you alone, madam?" asked the old woman, a very intimate note in her voice.

"Yes, I'll call you later," said Vera, and she at once took a big red rose from the side pocket of her jacket, slightly raised the head of the corpse with her left hand, and with her right hand put the flower under his neck. At that moment she realized that that love of which every woman dreams had gone past her. She recalled what General Anosov had said, almost prophetically, about everlasting, exclusive love. And, pushing aside the hair on the dead man's forehead, she clutched his

temples with her hands and put her lips to his cold, moist forehead in a long, affectionate kiss.

When she was leaving, the landlady spoke to her in her ingratiating accent.

"I can see, madam, that you're not like others, who come out of mere curiosity. Before his death Mr. Zheltkov said to me, 'If I happen to die and a lady comes to look at me tell her that Beethoven's best work is — ' He wrote it down for me. Here, look."

"Let me see it," said Vera Nikolayevna, and suddenly she broke into tears. "Please excuse me — this death shocked me so I couldn't help myself."

She read the words, written in the familiar hand: "*L. van Beethoven. Son. No. 2, op. 2. Largo Appassionato.*"

### XIII

Vera Nikolayevna came home late in the evening and was glad not to find either her husband or her brother in.

Nowever, Jennie Reiter was waiting for her; troubled by what she had seen and heard, Vera rushed to her and cried as she kissed her large beautiful hands, "Please play something for me, Jennie dear, I beg of you." And at once she went out of the room and sat on a bench in the flower-garden.

She scarcely doubted for a moment that Jennie would play the passage from the sonata asked for by that dead man with the odd name of Zheltkov.\*

And so it happened. From the very first chords Vera recognized that extraordinary work, unique in depth. And her soul seemed to split in two. She thought that a great love, of the kind which comes but once in a thousand years, had passed her by. She recalled General Anosov's words, wondering why Zheltkov had made her listen, of all Beethoven, to this particular work. Words strung themselves together in her mind. They fell in with the music to such an extent that they were like the verses of a hymn, each ending with the words: "*Hallowed be thy name.*"

"I shall now show you in tender sounds a life that meekly and joyfully doomed itself to torture, suffering, and death. I knew nothing

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\* Derived from *zheltok*, yolk.— *Tr.*

like complaint, reproach, or the pain of love scorned. To you I pray: *'Hallowed be thy name.'*

"Yes, I foresee suffering, blood, and death. And I think that it is hard for the body to part with the soul, but I give you praise, beautiful one, passionate praise, and a gentle love. *'Hallowed be thy name.'*

"I recall your every step, every smile, every look, the sound of your footsteps. My last memories are enwrapped in sweet sadness, in gentle, beautiful sadness. But I shall cause you no sorrow. I shall go alone, silently, for such is the will of God and fate. *'Hallowed be thy name.'*

"In my sorrowful dying hour I pray to you alone. Life might have been beautiful for me too. Do not murmur, my poor heart, do not. In my soul I call death, but my heart is full of praise for you: *'Hallowed be thy name.'*

"You do not know — neither you nor those around you — how beautiful you are. The clock is striking. It is time. And, dying, in the mournful hour of parting with life I still sing — glory to you.

"Here it comes, all-subduing death, but I say — glory to you!"

With her arms round the slender trunk of an acacia and her body pressed to it, Princess Vera was weeping. The tree shook gently. A wind came on a light wing to rustle in the leaves, as if in sympathy. The smell of the tobacco-plant was more pungent. Meanwhile the marvellous music continued, responding to her grief:

"Be at peace, my dearest, be at peace. Do you remember me? Do you? You are my last, my only love. Be at peace, I am with you. Think of me, and I shall be with you, because you and I loved each other only an instant, but for ever. Do you remember me? Do you? Here, I can feel your tears. Be at peace. Sleep is so sweet, so sweet to me."

Having finished the piece, Jennie Reiter came out of the room and saw Princess Vera, bathed in tears, sitting on the bench.

"What's the matter?" asked the pianist.

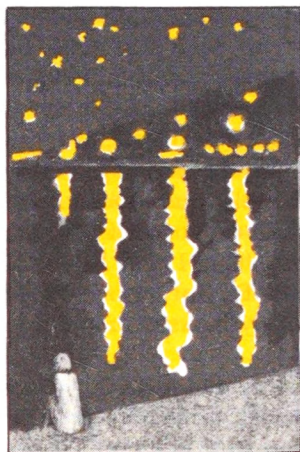
Her eyes glistening, Vera, restless and agitated, kissed Jennie's face and lips and eyes as she said:

"It's all right, he has forgiven me now. All is well."

*Translated by Stepan Apresyan*

# Konstantin Paustovsky

## THE WIND ROSE



*F*or the second day in a row the clouds over the sea were spread out like a huge fan; and on the distant horizon, where the clouds all started from, there was a sparkling and unusually white light.

Nastya was standing on the veranda of the holiday home and looking out at this light. As she stood there she screwed her eyes up and held her hair in her thin fingers to stop the wind from blowing it around.

She did not know what the light was, whether it was a reflection of the sunlit sea, or perhaps the brightness of the sky itself. And she did not have the courage to ask anyone else staying in the home. She had already noticed that the others thought her a silly and ignorant girl.

The more she stared at the bright light on the horizon, the more mysterious it seemed. She was drawn to that distant spot where a bluish haze lay unsteadily over the sea. The day seemed so vast, as though the sky had opened up to its very depths, and streams of light were pouring out from that spot, so far away, where the clouds came up over the sea.

Perhaps out there, on the horizon, she would have seen the blinding shore of an unknown land. Could there be such lands? Lands where, as they write in books, no man has yet set foot. How she longed to step

off a boat one morning onto the shore of just such a land, onto the sand washed by the tide, to look around and see her own footsteps behind her. In each of them there would be hiding a cool shadow, a reminder of the night.

And then she would climb up higher and see... What would she see? Trees on the slopes of rocky mountains, streams tumbling down in cascades, throwing up masses of froth and washing small stones along in their paths. She would see a huge sun, throw back her head and shout aloud, a long-drawn-out shout, as loud as her young voice could make it. She would shout out, and listen to the echo answering the first human shout in the land.

Nastya was lost in thought and did not notice the poet Sokolovsky come out onto the veranda. This particular holiday home, as well as its residents, was proud to have Sokolovsky staying there. But Nastya had long been afraid of him. If she were to have met him on the street, she would never have guessed that he was a poet. She thought that, even in appearance, every poet should have something to distinguish him from ordinary people: she thought of Pushkin's negroid lips, Lermontov's sad and gloomy eyes, and Mayakovsky's voice of thunder.

But there was nothing like that about Sokolovsky. He was a stocky man of uncertain age, with a long face and large hands. Each evening he would go into a small restaurant, surrounded by admirers, and he would always be cracking jokes. He called Nastya a 'child of nature', but looked on her with approbation.

He had given her a small volume of his poems to read. The blue cover of the book had a drawing of some untidy sheaves of wheat or rye. And there were poems about the war, and about the city where the poet 'heard the thunder of the age and carried war within his heart'.

Nastya did not like the poems, but she could not tell Sokolovsky that. She thanked him when she gave him the volume back, but he took her hands in his, looked into her face with his yellow eyes and asked: "Aphrodite, my child, why do you hide from everyone?"

Nastya withdrew her hands, blushed, and said nothing.

"Don't be angry," he said soothingly. "The company here, of course, is much of a muchness. But I like you. And anyway, what does everyone else here matter to you and me?"

With these condescending words he tried to put Nastya on a par with himself, a recognised poet. Nastya blushed even more deeply.

After this short talk Sokolovsky changed his attitude towards Nastya, he began to talk more gently with her, joked a lot, and often thought

up something unexpected to please her. He might point out a pretty stone to her on the beach, and when she picked it up there would be a chocolate in a silver wrapper underneath. Or at Nastya's place in the dining-room there appeared a glass with a bright yellow, feathery chrysanthemum in it, while none of the other women had a chrysanthemum, only a pepper-pot with the inscription: 'Souvenir of Sochi'.

The other women were as dark as thunder clouds, and whenever Nastya appeared among them they would look at one another and fall silent. They gathered in their cosy rooms — all wearing brightly coloured pyjamas, like some fancy tropical birds — and they expressed their indignation at Sokolovsky's poor taste. How could he exchange women of culture for this naive girl who couldn't even talk properly? To exchange them for a teacher-training college student who had never even heard of Hemingway! How on earth had she got into *their* holiday home in the first place?! If only she were beautiful, then they could have understood Sokolovsky. But as it was, what did he see in her?

But the other women secretly envied Nastya for her plaits, heavy and light brown with a touch of copper, for her large eyes and particularly for her long black eye-lashes. It was quite unbelievable that they were real, and not false lashes glued on.

Nastya was aware of all this, and was in despair. "Is it my fault," she would think to herself, "that my father was a simple peasant, and my mother still does nothing but look after chickens and the garden? What do these peahens want of me?"

Sokolovsky liked asking Nastya about her home village; and Nastya, covered in blushes, was happy to answer his questions:

"Our village stretches on and on by a gully. And in the spring, when the acacias are in flower, then it looks as though all the gardens are full of boiling milk. Mum's house is only small, but it's clean and white, and the stove has flowers painted all over it, hollyhocks and marigolds. It's lovely where we live. Why don't you come next summer? Mum will be ever so pleased! She is really kind and warm-hearted, she's always smiling."

"Warm-hearted? Like you?" Sokolovsky asked.

"Yes," Nastya answered trustingly. "I take after her."

"Tell me the truth," Sokolovsky said, taking hold of Nastya's hands and looking at her long fingers. "Your mum must have had an affair with a passing Adonis, mustn't she, for you to be like you are?"

"What are you saying?!" Nastya cried out in fright. "You should be ashamed!"

In the evenings Sokolovsky would often walk with Nastya into the

small town not far away. Nastya loved the highway running along the sea-front and covered with the feathery shadows of the eucalyptus trees, she loved the steep hills and the fleecy forests along the rumbling shore-line where the sun shone through to warm the trees to their very roots, she loved the bitter scent of the laurel and even the smell of the mild lilac wine to which Sokolovsky treated her one evening in a restaurant of bare planks.

The restaurant's proprietor, a black-haired man with bulging eyes, wiped the table with a wine-damp cloth and winked at Sokolovsky. A large bottle of wine then appeared on the table.

Sokolovsky drank in silence, glass after glass, as though he wanted to drink the whole bottle as quickly as he could. Nastya only drank one glass, and then suddenly said:

"You write bad poems. Very bad poems. Recite something good for me."

Having spoken, she grew afraid. If it hadn't been for the wine and the merry lightness in her head, of course, she wouldn't have said anything like that. But Sokolovsky took no offence. He laughed and, looking towards the sea where a number of pochards were swimming, said:

"I forgive you. Everything. What would you like to hear?"

"Maybe Pushkin?" she asked uncertainly. "Only don't go too fast."

"Alright," Sokolovsky sighed, and quietly began to recite the very words that Nastya had wanted to hear; but, hearing them, she trembled and froze.

*"This alien land you did abandon, and sought the shores of distant home..."*

Nastya looked at Sokolovsky and didn't recognise him. He was sitting with his shoulders bent, and was reciting quietly and distinctly, as if to himself.

"He must be a good man," Nastya thought to herself. "Of course he is."

*"But there, alas, where heaven's vaults in sparkling blue do daily shine,"* Sokolovsky recited, and Nastya felt her throat tighten. She knew what was coming; after these solemn words there stood death, showing no mercy to the poet's love, nor to his anguish, nor yet to the radiant beauty of the woman who loved him. And then the words came: *"Where under cliffs the waters slumber, you fell asleep the final time..."*

A tear slipped down Nastya's cheek and fell into her glass where a little of her wine remained. And when Sokolovsky finished, and raised his head, Nastya was already crying openly. Sokolovsky frowned and

looked at her, then took her hand and kissed it. Nastya began to cry even more bitterly.

"Yes," Sokolovsky said quietly. "Truly a giant! But I am weak."

On their way back from the restaurant, Nastya's head began to spin when they were crossing a small bridge over a rushing stream. The stars suddenly began to sway and fall into the sea. Sokolovsky caught hold of her and set her down on a warm rock by the roadside.

"Silly of me!" Nastya said quietly. "It's because of the wine. I haven't drunk any in the last two years."

A car came along the highway. The light from its headlamps hit Nastya in the face. In this streaming light her face, with her eyes closed, seemed to Sokolovsky to be so beautiful that he took hold of her shoulders and kissed her trembling lips. Nastya tore herself free, jumped up, but then sat down again immediately on the stone and said:

"Why? It's terrible!"

Nastya went back to her room in confusion, and she could not sleep at all that night. Several times she crept out onto the veranda and stared at the sea, as though it could give the words of comfort that would justify that first kiss and the intimacy, and would wash the bitterness out of her heart. But in that bitterness, like a cunning animal, there began to flash more and more often an incomprehensible joy.

The sea lay in darkness, and its endless noise, as always, was indifferent to everything human, as though the waves were just repeating the same thing over and over again: to sleep, to sleep, to sleep...

The sea did not help Nastya. Perhaps there was only one man who could help her: a grey-haired writer with a lean face. Nastya had seen him once on the pier, and she knew he was staying at the white sanatorium high on the hill, surrounded by cypresses.

What would he have said to her? "My child," he would probably have said, "however much you may be afraid of it, you have fallen in love. If it is a joy, then take care of it like a mother takes care of her child. But if it is a cross, then you must bear it for a long time, perhaps all your life. And you will never wonder whether your beloved is worthy of your love or not. As a grain of sand cannot stop a wave in the sea, so you cannot stop your simple and devoted heart. And since that is the case, love him."

And Nastya had fallen in love. It was both joyful and quite terrible, because several times a day she would move from despair to calm, and then back to despair again. She couldn't understand why, but for some reason everything that was happening to her, although it seemed to be something good, also seemed very insecure.



"My happiness is in his hands," she would think to herself. "But if he suddenly opens his hands, he'll drop my happiness and smash it on the floor."

Also, she felt ashamed in front of the people around her, as though she had stolen from them something that belonged to everybody, not to her alone; and they would never forgive her that...

And now, when Sokolovsky came out onto the veranda and stood behind her, she was thinking that love was not all there was to happiness. For full happiness there had to be much more: merriment, and the sea out there, and those pink clouds... There had to be everything.

"The wind rose," Sokolovsky suddenly spoke behind her.

Nastya turned round.

"What?" she asked.

"What's going on up there in the sky," Sokolovsky calmly explained, "it's called the wind rose. The clouds are coming out from a single point, and going off in all directions. Where that bright spot is, that's where the wind starts from, and it blows evenly in all directions."

"The wind rose," Nastya repeated, and smiled. "How come you know so much?"

Sokolovsky gave no answer.

"The more you know, the more interesting life is," Nastya remarked.

The light on the horizon had now spread out and become a lake of silver. It sparkled and grew, coming closer to the shore.

"Nastya," Sokolovsky said after a short silence. "I got a telegramme today. From Moscow. I must leave tomorrow."

Nastya did not look round. Only her fingers grasped more firmly on the veranda railing that was still wet from the recent rain.

"Well, so what?" she asked, barely audibly.

"Let's talk," Sokolovsky suggested uncertainly. "About what's going to happen in Moscow."

Nastya did not answer immediately.

"Nothing," she said at last, turning to Sokolovsky and smiling at him, like a grown-up smiles at a small child. "Don't worry. I won't try to see you in Moscow, I won't write, or phone ... nothing! Good luck to you. I've worked everything out. And I'm not at all angry with you. You can live your life as you want."

"Nastya!" Sokolovsky said in a strangled, tragic voice.

"Well? Nastya what? I started thinking things out a long time ago. Do you remember you said the most important things in life were peace and easy happiness? Even if only for a fortnight. I'd happily ruin my life for you, but that's something you can't do. You have a family, and

a position in society. And what's more, you're tired, it's hard for you to change your life. I can remember everything you've told me. Go home in peace. You won't have any unpleasantness from me."

Sokolovsky grasped Nastya's hands and began to kiss them, muttering hurriedly:

"But will I see you again? Say yes! I will see you again, won't I?"

"If you want to, yes," Nastya answered calmly. She withdrew her hands carefully from Sokolovsky's, lifted his chin, looked into his perplexed eyes, kissed him on the forehead and said very quietly:

"You're a weak man. But a dear one. And I'll say to you what my granny used to say: God will forgive you."

"What do you mean, do you despise me?" Sokolovsky asked in surprise.

"Yes," Nastya said. "And I love you too. But we won't talk about things like that any more."

Nastya left the veranda and slowly walked towards the sea. Sokolovsky watched her go. She didn't look round even once.

"I'm a scoundrel," Sokolovsky thought to himself. And this thought immediately made his heart feel lighter. This word seemed to take away from him all his responsibilities, doubts, and the necessity of making decisions, it took away everything connected with Nastya.

Sokolovsky sighed, took out a cigarette and sat down in a wicker chair. As he enjoyed the strong tobacco he repeated to himself:

"I'm a scoundrel. Oh well! It is the last time."

His heart was particularly light because there was only one person there who knew what a coward he was, but that person would tell nobody. Nothing would change. Admirers would gather around him as always, like birds around a lighthouse, they would listen to his witticisms with their usual delight, and they would be proud of being acquainted with a well-known poet.

Nastya was walking slowly along the edge of the surf. The waves were alternately driving tangerine peel and brown magnolia leaves up onto the shore, and washing them away again. A thin boy was fishing with a home-made fishing-rod. He was a well-known figure on the beach, and went by the name of Captain Tolya. In the pockets of his green trousers and in the body of his torn jersey he carried all sorts of interesting things: a catapult, hooks, nuts, a tin of worms, and dried crabs' claws.

Nastya went up to him and sat down on the warm pebbles. A wave ran right up to her feet but, after second thoughts, flooded back into the sea, taking its foam with it.

"Well, Tolya, how's life?" Nastya asked, smiling painfully.

Tolya glanced at her quickly and turned away again.

"It's alright," he answered unhappily. "The other lads caught all the fish first thing this morning. But I was too late. There's none left now."

He tugged fiercely on the fishing-rod, and began to pull the line out of the water. At the end of the line, on a huge and rusty hook, there hung a small tiddler that looked like a leech. Tolya spat.

"Pesty fish!" he said angrily. "It might have been a bit bigger!"

Suddenly Tolya dropped his rod and line, and started running along the edge of the water, taking his catapult out of his pocket as he ran.

"It's a pochard!" he cried to Nastya.

The pochard was floating on the waves near the shore. It turned its head and looked in alarm at Tolya. Tolya, hardly bothering to take aim, fired his catapult. His stone cut into the water close to the bird. The pochard disappeared immediately. It came back to the surface so far away that it was now out of the question to hit it with the catapult. Tolya looked at his catapult in surprise, as though he had missed the bird because of some fault in the catapult. Then he waved the fishing-rod wildly over his head, cast the hook far out into the sea and said to Nastya:

"I'll just catch some more, and you can come to us for supper this evening. My mum fries them like nobody else can."

"And who's your mum?"

"She works at your place. Do you know Pasha? That's her."

"I know her," Nastya answered, and blushed. One evening, when she was sitting on the veranda with Sokolovsky and he was kissing her, Pasha had come out. Pasha had been embarrassed, and started fussing around the veranda as though she was looking for something. Sokolovsky had stared at her with angry, unmoving eyes.

"Alright, I'll come," Nastya agreed. "Where do you live?"

"There's no way you'll find it yourself. I'll come and fetch you. In time for supper."

Nastya stood up and went back to the holiday home. The sun was already sinking down towards the sea, and the clouds were heaving in golden pathways on the waves. Across these golden pathways there passed a large steamer, puffing out a line of smoke from its funnel.

Nastya stopped many times, still thinking about Sokolovsky. What a weak, unfortunate man! Maybe his weakness, and his desire to seem different than he was, were simply because no one really loved him. Nobody needed him, and nobody's heart ached when he

did anything silly, made a mistake, told a lie, or suffered. "I shouldn't judge him," Nastya thought to herself. "He's a poet. Maybe poets really do need something new all the time: people, unexpected meetings, affairs. Otherwise they would get bored, and stop writing."

When it started growing dark the first star twinkled in the sky, a lonely, bright star, one that Nastya had always felt sorry for, as though it were a good friend from whom she was separated. She went out into the park and strolled along the dark alleyway.

On a bench near an old plane-tree sat Sokolovsky, and next to him was a plump woman with round, insistent eyes, and a cigarette in the corner of her mouth. In the holiday home everyone called her Lusya. Her plump fingers with their blood-red nails were slapping Sokolovsky's hand, and she was saying:

"You're humiliating yourself with this affair, Petya. What a naive man you are! Surely you can't think that nobody has noticed anything. Your every step is watched. And what do you see in her that's so unusual? A poet, talented and educated, and next to him some silly little girl. You have no respect for yourself, Petya. You can't go on like this, my dear."

"I thank you, my dearest Lusya," Sokolovsky answered, and Nastya's heart contracted as she realised that she was eavesdropping, and that it was something terrible and vile. Sokolovsky went on: "Thank you for your frankness. I am very well aware of all that myself. Nastya interests me only as a literary figure. Nothing more! And then, you know yourself that I need stimulation. Without it I cannot write. And anyway, it's all over. I have exhausted that theme fully."

"So," Lusya commented playfully, still slapping Sokolovsky's hands with her fingers, "we'll soon be able to read your latest poem, and in it we'll recognise our silly little Nastya?"

Nastya turned and walked quickly back to her room. Her face was burning. She pressed her hands to her cheeks. Tears immediately formed in her eyes. Once in her room, she sat down in a corner of her divan, and sat there motionless and cross-legged, not daring to move. She knew that if she were to move, or release her clenched fists, then she would cry aloud, because everything inside her was gnawing with a dull pain. Nastya slowly rocked from side to side with the pain, her mouth partly open, staring into the distance with wonderment. It seemed to her that someone was asking her a question with the same persistent regularity as the small vein in her temple was throbbing:

"What is happening? What is happening? Tell me!"

Then Nastya remembered that at any moment now she would be called to supper. She had to leave as soon as she could. She jumped up, opened the door, and gave a strangled cry: Tolya was standing outside the door in the corridor. He was holding his torn cap in his hand.

"I've been waiting ever so long," he said mysteriously, "waiting for you to come out. Mum's already frying the fish. With prunes."

"Let's go!" Nastya said briefly, and put her hand on Tolya's shoulder; it was thin and hot, and she felt his collar-bone sticking out.

Tolya led Nastya into the large tangerine orchard. The plank-built house, with a terrace, where Pasha lived, stood at the far end of the orchard. A narrow path of coarse gravel passed through the orchard, and they had to keep their heads low as the branches of the tangerine-trees reached down to the floor. The going was not made any easier by a fluffy black dog that dashed about at their feet and was constantly trying to lick Nastya's hands.

"Do go in!" Pasha called from behind a thicket where the open fire was crackling and giving off sweet-scented smoke. Pasha fed it with cypress chips.

Nastya entered the house, looked around her and gave a sigh. How lovely!

"Where's all this from?" she asked Tolya.

"Before us there was an old man living here, a sea captain. All on his own. This was all his. He died in the winter, because of all the rain, and he was fairly weak as it was. That's his photograph over there on the chest of drawers, in a full captain's uniform."

Nastya did not look at the photograph of the old man in his full captain's uniform. She was looking at a painting on the wall, and did not hear Tolya's last words. She seemed to have seen, sometime long ago, what was shown in the painting, but she couldn't for the life of her remember where or when. It had probably been in a dream.

A bluish twilight hung over the sea, over the dull and quiet water of its flat surface, and in the distance, on the shore of an unknown land, there were yellow harbour lights. These lights were reflected on the water in long columns. And there was a single, terribly distant star twinkling in a sky that was like mist, a sad star, the companion of ships. "What can there be over there on the shore?" Nastya wondered. Probably a pier, and on it there would be girls in dresses as light as this northern night, happy girls, trusting in their lovers. And silence. Silence for thousands and thousands of miles all

around. Only a rare wave, half-asleep, would splash up on the sandy shore and then grow silent, as though afraid of its own sound.

"Admiring our treasures?" Pasha asked. She had come in with a frying-pan full of fish. "This is our legacy from Yevgeni Maximovich. The pictures, the books, the charts, and all sorts of seafaring instruments."

"Pasha," Nastya said, "I've only got a short time left in the holiday home. Can I move in with you? I don't want to stay there any more."

"Of course," Pasha answered, wiped her hands on her apron, walked up to Nastya and began stroking her hair. "Of course, my dear, my beauty."

Nastya raised her tear-filled eyes to Pasha.

"But don't tell me anything," Pasha said. "I can see it all for myself. You sit down and eat. And I'll run and collect your things and bring them here. You just write a note for the manager."

Nastya wrote two notes, one to the manager, one to Sokolovsky.

"I do not want to be," she wrote to Sokolovsky, "and will not be, a guinea-pig for your poetical experiments. I think you even lied about that, because I caught your interest not at all as a literary character, but simply as a woman. Who gave you the right to play with things like love? Was it talent? In any case, you haven't got more than a gramme of talent. And even if you had any more it would be all the same: talent was created to give people joy; it wasn't people who were created so that talent could grow like a poisonous mushroom. A real person should be real in everything: in poetry, in life, in every detail. But you are not real. And your poems are just deceit and lies. You dress yourself up in them, like they were beautiful clothes, to parade yourself in front of other people. That's all that a silly little girl like me can say to you. Good-bye."

An hour later Pasha brought Nastya's suitcase with her things in it, and a large envelope from Sokolovsky. Nastya opened the envelope, and onto the floor there fell the torn and crumpled pages of the book of poetry which Sokolovsky had given Nastya to read. With the torn pages there was a note. Sokolovsky had written: "You are right. I have torn up my poems."

"And he can still play the fool!" Nastya said, collected all the pieces of paper into the envelope, including the note, went out into the orchard, and threw the envelope into the fire.

That night Pasha was away on her shift in the holiday home. Tolya slept curled up on a trunk. Nastya undressed, and sat lost in thought on the bed. She stared for a long time at the picture with the twilight sea and the distant lights, then she noticed next to it an old sea-chart. Nastya put on her slippers and went up to the chart. There were some blue rivers shown on it running into a green ocean, and lighthouses were shown in fine circles. In one corner of the chart Nastya saw a star drawn in Indian ink, and over it was the inscription "Wind Rose". The beams emanating from the star were of different lengths, and Nastya wrinkled her brow as she stood for a long time staring at the drawing and trying to work out what it meant. Then, from the inscriptions "north", "east", "south" and "west", she realised that each beam of the star showed the strength and direction of the winds blowing around the shores depicted on the chart. Nastya recalled everything that Sokolovsky had told her about the wind rose, and she just sighed. Even in this, not knowing anything about it, he had lied, trying to impress her and show off.

"I'll never forgive him," Nastya said. "Never! Not even on my death-bed."

She lay down to sleep, pulled the blanket over her, and drew up her knees, but they were as cold as ice. Nastya could not get warm and go to sleep, and she cried quietly all night.

In the morning, when a ray of sunlight lit up the orange fruit of the persimmon hanging on the wall, Nastya got up, dressed, and went down to the sea. The sound of its rollers filled the air, and brought to the shore the warm breath of its boundless expanses.

Nastya threw off her dress and entered the water. She lay on her back and screwed up her eyes; on her eye-lashes, in the tiny droplets of water, there were such waves of light and glitter that she even smiled.

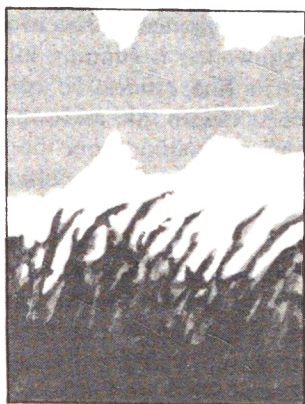
"The sea!" she whispered, caressing the warm water as it poured through her fingers.

She breathed easily and strongly, and thought how it was all over and how she, Nastya, had now become stricter towards life. And the sea rolled around her and knew nothing whatsoever of the great power given to it to wash away dirt and bitterness from a human heart.

*Translated by Graham Whittaker*

# Nikolai Gribachev

## THE STORY OF A FIRST LOVE



The river shimmered in the moonlight. Fish jumped and in the mainstream and even in the shadow of the bushes silvery rings spun rippling over the water, their crescent shapes circling and slowly subsiding. White mist rose over the flats giving off a whitish glow, willows glistened along the creeks, drops of dew glistened too on the tufts of sedge, as if a group of huntsmen were smoking there. In the tent where we had already retired for the night, the moonlight had a bluish-yellow tinge to it like tobacco smoke.

"An enchanted kingdom," Sergei said with a sigh. "How can one go to sleep in a place like this? Why doesn't someone tell us a fairy-tale?"

"Did you say someone?" Petro was surprised. "Surely the Captain's the man for that!"

"A tale about a princess," Sashka added, "who was woken up by a kiss... Let's see what you can make of it, Captain!"

"I never had the good fortune to meet a princess," grinned the Captain. "I did once though set eyes on Helene, the former Queen of Rumania. Will she do?"

"No, she won't," said Sashka. "She's old and wicked. We'll leave her to live out her days in her American kingdom... You must have been young once, Captain. Cast your mind back and come up with a story for us!"



The Captain sighed and fell silent, then he sighed again and began thinking, it was as if he was groping for an appropriate subject in the winding caverns of his memory where major events lie piled up with all sorts of bric-a-brac which, for all one knows, may well come in handy one day.

"Let's take beauty," he began, as if at long last he had stumbled upon an important theme. "What is beauty, when it comes down to it? According to the ancients it is the right proportions that count — the nose has to be of a certain proportion, the forehead too... Often though, everything seems to be right, yet one's not moved... Or let's paint a visual picture — golden tresses, bright blue eyes... Yet when it comes down to it gold has a rather abstract, cold feel to it... Gold would make good spoon-bait to catch a pike-perch or chub with!" The Captain had got sidetracked into the intricacies of fishing. "It would shine splendidly under water and there would be no need to polish it with sand... Beauty is a question of soul, character. When all these gold and bright blue flecks are found in an exceptional character then there is no way, whatever one's age, one can put up any resistance and if one's heart is not scarred forever, it is certainly touched.

"A woman of this very calibre once turned up in our village.

"It was in '26, as far as I remember, that a certain Pyotr Ivanovich Khmelkov came to take up permanent residence with us from a neighbouring village. He bought himself a cottage and a vegetable patch; he didn't till the soil though, indeed it was as if he had no interest in it at all, instead he made horse's collars, saddle-pads and breech-bands. He'd moved to our village in fact because it was closer to the market. According to the countryman's understanding of things he was a pretty average sort of chap: he had a retiring disposition, reddish-brown hair and was of slight build; he was neither a peasant nor did he belong to the intelligentsia. Such types weren't particularly popular with the locals, though they weren't interfered with in any way — live and let live as the saying goes. Pyotr Ivanovich was a widower. A cousin three-times removed looked after the house, a timid woman who even on holidays would sit alone cracking sunflower seeds under the window in the front garden. And if it hadn't been for the saddle-maker's daughter, Sonya Khmelkova, they'd have gone on living in our village virtually unnoticed. Taking part in our country dances and merrymaking Sonya had the effect of a spark that falls on a dry field of stubble: before you could say knife it was all ablaze.

"She wasn't immediately noticed — there was a beauty in every third cottage at home and our village was a big one, stretching for about three kilometres, I remember her first appearance of a late afternoon on a Sunday: she was sitting among a group of village girls on a pile of logs. Her grey eyes had a rather wild look about them and she gazed at the street as if she were seeing it for the first time. She had fair hair with a dull, ash blond tinge to it and pouting, good-natured lips; her foot was tapping against a log as if she could hear music in the air. Two of the ringleaders among the local youth, walked up: Nikita Somov, good-looking and a fine singer and Senka Streltsov, a stocky, snub-nosed bully. With a chest like a barrel, he invariably had an oafish grin on his face. Stopping in front of Sonya Khmelkova and sizing her up as if she were an item in a shop, they delivered their verdict:

"Not bad?"

"Hm."

"For want of anything better, eh?"

"Right. Against a rainy day!"

"Sonya Khmelkova gulped as if she had swallowed something, but she didn't say a word. Senka and Nikita hung about for a while, then giving her a quizzical look, walked off. And by evening the news had got round all the village lads — from teenagers to young men of marriageable age there were about fifty of us all told — that Sonya Khmelkova was nothing to write home about. And Sonya developed a habit of sitting with the other girls; she'd sometimes join in their songs rather timidly and then unnoticed would slip off home. I've no idea whether this was because she was pining for someone or she was trying to make up her mind about one of us.

"On Whitsunday or it may have been Whitmonday — at that time there was no such thing as a Komsomol cell in our village and the holiday would be celebrated in accordance with ancient custom, the whole street being decked out in greenery — on Whitsunday or, as I said, it may have been Whit monday, a huge round dance got underway in the street. The village lasses started off and old and young alike flocked up in droves. Singing the traditional round-dance songs, they circled several times, then the accordionist, having warmed up and in a reckless, festive mood, launched with a wild cry into a Russian dance. And there, in the middle of the circle was Sonya Khmelkova. I've no idea how she got there; perhaps the other lasses had teasingly pushed her forward or one of the boys had given her a tug by the hand. She stood gazing

round her in surprise, a rather guarded look in her grey eyes which were ever so slightly narrowed. She leant back as if preparing to dive into the crowd, straightened up again and almost imperceptibly took a small step, then another and it seemed as if the road itself was moving and flowing under her feet... You all know how Russians dance, stamping with such fervour that their heels seem to give off puffs of smoke. But Sonya danced in a way that was very much her own: swaying like a birch-tree in the wind, she suddenly started to circle, curtsying and rising to her feet again, the hem of her white dress flaring out like a daisy about her sun-burnt legs, the ends of her kerchief fluttering in pale blue rings round her head. Her pouting lips opened wider and wider revealing a row of pearl-white teeth and a fleeting smile lit up her face. A pink-coloured handkerchief flew out of her hand to fall, circling, in the dust. Nikita Somov, pushing past Senka who was gaping in astonishment, rushed forward to pick it up. Whereupon Sonya darted into the crowd and ran off!

"Later on we came to know that such sharp changes in mood were quite common with her, but at the time we were puzzled to put it mildly. We went to her cottage, but instead of answering our questions the cousin three-times removed rolled up the sunflower seeds in her handkerchief and disappeared indoors.

"That evening Sonya was again to be seen sitting among the shoal of village girls on the log-pile. And a very different Nikita swaggered up to her: a conciliatory grin on his face and showing off his black forelock, the best in the whole village. We knew that grin and swagger of old: it meant that, arm round her shoulders, he'd see her home of an evening and stand whispering to her, lounging against her garden fence. He was a past master at such ploys!.. Handing Sonya her handkerchief and asking the girls to move up, Nikita sat down beside her.

"'Like me to come with you?' he asked.

"'Where to?' Sonya narrowed her eyes.

"'Home...'

"'I know the way home...'

"'Where would you like to go then?'

"'Home.'

"'I don't understand,' Nikita muttered.

"'That's just it, you don't, you cheeky beggar,' Sonya retorted, speaking in a loud voice on purpose. 'Once the penny has dropped, come and tell me and I promise I'll listen...'

"Jumping up from the log on which he'd been sitting, Nikita stood, hands on hips.

"I can wait," he threw out haughtily. "And when you call for me mind you shout your head off, I'm deaf at times!"

"You'll hear me alright," Sonya promised him. "I'll only have to whisper and you'll come running!.."

"Grinning, Nikita walked off, but once alone with the lads, he said in a threatening voice:

"If I see anyone with Khmelkova, they'll only have themselves to blame... I'll give her the lesson of her life! And you know me, I never go back on my word.."

"We knew Nikita of old: anyone who got in his way had best steer clear of all merry-making for if he didn't, he'd be the butt of all ridicule, the target of all ditties; his hair would be tweaked mercilessly from behind as he was sitting on the log-pile or standing in a circle in a round dance and there would be no point in searching for the culprit; if he saw a girl home he'd trip up over a piece of cord strung across the path; walking forward to join in the dancing he'd be sent flying headlong into the dust by a foot put out at the wrong moment. Nikita never beat up anyone himself nor did he entrust others to do so on his behalf — that sort of behaviour was too coarse for him — he was ingenious when it came to revenge, mockery and humiliation were more his line. Only one person was able to cross Nikita and this was not his chum Senka Streltsov, but Alyosha Kruglov who, at first sight, was a fairly unremarkable-looking lad. Though he was a pretty normal size for a sixteen-year-old, he was certainly no Hercules, he had freckles on his nose and a light brown forelock of hair which stuck up over his high forehead. His best feature were his grey eyes which gazed straight ahead and had a permanently questioning look in them. He had never been known to avert his gaze however dire the threat, whoever stood before him.

"To believe though that Nikita could be stopped by a gaze, however unflinching, would be absurd. No, in his own way, Nikita was fond of this somewhat unprepossessing-looking lad and even rather afraid of him though he would have been hard put to it to explain why. Alyosha was an avid reader of books and knew more than all the other village boys put together; at the age of twelve he announced he wasn't going to church anymore because God didn't exist and despite a cruel dressing down from his father he stuck fast to his decision; for the last one and a half years, in the autumn slush and hard frost of winter with the snow reaching up

to the top of the wattle fencing and the log walls of the peasant huts giving off crackling sounds from the cold, he would often trudge five miles to the first Komsomol cell to have been set up in our district, though he wasn't a Komsomol, nor did he have any friends among them. Once he got there, however, due to his shyness he would more often than not hang about on the porch or stand in the doorway of the club listening to what was being said. When he was about fourteen, during the night watch over the horses in the meadow, he had been subjugated to a terrifying ordeal. 'So God doesn't exist?' he was asked. 'No.' 'Nor the devil?' 'No.' 'Nor witches? Nor water-spirits? Swim across the river then!' It was a pitch dark August night, heavy sheat-fish jumped in the deep pools making a sound as if someone was beating the surface of the water with the palms of their hands. A silver poplar rustled on the high chalk cliff on the opposite shore. It stood alone and rustled even when there wasn't a breath of wind: according to an old village superstition, witches were in the habit of taking a breather on the tree. At the spot where Alyosha had to enter the river there was a steep bank and the water was very deep. Here, about three months ago, a friend of Alyosha's, a boy of about his own age, had drowned. Alyosha went white when he heard what he was being asked to do and invited two of his chums to accompany him. They agreed but, on reaching the river bank, turned back. And he swam across alone, a minute figure in the inky water which was full of prowling sheat-fish, while from the splashing of his arms dim stars burst like bubbles under his very nose. When he got under the chalk cliff he was told to give a shout — the sign that he had got across safely; the shout when it came was muffled as if it emanated from underground... That same night when Alyosha, exhausted, had fallen asleep, two of the lads decided, for a joke, to tie his legs up with a bridle and drag him across the stubble. Nikita sent them packing with the words:

"Hands off! His head's worth two of yours — yours are so thick they are only good as lasts to weave bast shoes on... He didn't funk it, did he? Let him sleep till the change of watch.'

"He'll get too big for his boots,' said one of the kids in an offended tone.

"Pride is a complex thing,' Nikita said. 'Man isn't like a cock who sits crowing on a fence just to show off. A man's pride enables him to endure all sorts of knocks.'

"Alyosha never got to hear of this conversation, but the boys

left off teasing him and on the night watch they would ask him more and more questions about towns, the sea, machines and anything else that happened to come into their minds. Nikita, though, never asked questions, he would lie on his coat, his head cupped in his hand, staring into the fire and not saying a word. His dark eyes gleaming, his black forelock throwing a ring-shaped shadow on his tanned cheek — he was really handsome!”

The Captain, our story-teller, fell silent — it appeared that he too was listening spellbound to someone. A night bird flew shrieking over the tent. Bending back the tarpaulin, the mechanic checked over our boat and lit up a cigarette which glowed like a wolf's eye in the darkness. The two teenagers who were travelling with us down the Desna were fast asleep. For them the Captain's tale was antediluvian. Life for them had begun with the war when they had run after the fleeing Germans picking up their spent cartridge cases.

“Well?” Sashka spoke up.

““Well’ what?”

“What happened next?.. Who was the third man? I'm sure there must have been a third man — boy and girl get involved and a nonentity comes along and abducts the girl. I'm fed up to the backteeth with the dramatic threesome...”

“You go to the theatre too much,” said Sergei, “that's your trouble.”

“There was no third man,” the Captain said gently. “A pity, but there it is! One evening Alyosha saw Sonya home after a get-together: he led her off in front of everyone. I don't know whether he'd heard about Nikita's threat. He was a friend of mine but when I asked him about this he didn't answer, he just stared me straight in the eye without saying a word. I guess he probably had heard... Why did Sonya Khmelkova let the unremarkable-looking Alyosha see her home? To spite Nikita, probably — see whom I'm going out with now, handsome. But it may well be she had no idea whom she was really hurting.

“The same thing was repeated the following day, then again until eventually it became a daily occurrence. Sonya Khmelkova changed: she became an indefatigable dancer and never stopped singing and joking. And the odd thing about it was she was popular with the other village girls, who flocked round her, forgiving her everything and considering it quite natural that all the boys should pay court to her. After all, usually on such occasions, girls have ready tongues! Sonya would sometimes be friendly with the village lads and sometimes,

whoever it was, she would send him off with a flea in his ear. She was radiant and sparkled like silvery water in the moonlight! And before long there was no boy in the village aged between sixteen and twenty who didn't number himself among her admirers. And that includes me too," the Captain admitted, a certain wistfulness creeping into his voice. "I remember her bending down towards me, her hair tickling my face and saying with a sigh, 'No, better not ... don't see me home!' and turning away. Why 'better not'? Why didn't she want me to see her home? I couldn't make head or tail of it and for a whole month I wandered around as if in a daze — I only had to remember the incident for everything to blur and all I could see in front of me were her grey eyes with their strange mocking look. There was something devilish about her, alright! And she would spend all her time with Alyosha... Sometimes they wouldn't even join the other young people, but would sit, just the two of them, on the bench.

"When Nikita was told that Alyosha had seen her home the first time, he bent his head so low that his forelock slid down onto the bridge of his nose. He stood silently, then in an unexpectedly calm voice, he asked:

"Well?"

"You issued an ultimatum... What should be done?"

"Nothing," said Nikita. "Since it's Alyosha, nothing... It's alright for him..."

"About two weeks later, Alyosha and Sonya were sitting on their bench when Nikita came up. Greeting them in a friendly manner, he sat down and lit up.

"You've come then?" Sonya said without a smile.

"Yes."

"I said you would."

"I know. May I sit with you?"

"Ask Alyosha, it's all the same with me."

"It was odd, there was not so much as a hint of a snub, or of gloating on her part. We stood in amazement, their behaviour was quite out of character: there they sat, the two of them, subdued and serious, neither of them uttering a word. Alyosha was the only one who talked, quickly and somewhat incoherently. One could see he was rather het-up. Nikita looked neither at us, nor at Alyosha, nor even at Sonya. He sat staring straight ahead of him at the ground. Then shaking his head and throwing back his forelock, he said:

"Let's sing?"

“‘Let’s!’ said Sonya, in a calm voice.

“Our village stands on a hill and below to right and left are meadows; green, lacelike osiers wind round the lakes and creeks, while further on, beyond the meadows, the blue Bryansk forests stretch to the horizon. Looking out over this landscape one feels as if one is flying! Corncrakes scuttle about in the grass and in the fields the cries of female quails remind us that evening is approaching; a light breeze wafts over the gardens, rustling the trees and plants — the whole world, from the sky to the earth, appears to be filled with music. The sun rises like a big red mushroom out of the forest; and the moon climbs so high in the sky, one doesn’t see it, though seventy moons are reflected in the water of the rivers and lakes below one. And now, floating out into this vast space came the sound of low, pensive singing and one wanted to cry and to run though one didn’t know where to, and to nestle against someone’s shoulder and to accomplish an unheard-of feat and one felt tormented and apprehensive though one didn’t know why! And the song came over well — two male voices and one female voice.

“And this rather strange turn of events continued: every evening, either right from sundown or after the get-together, the three of them would sit staring into the distance and singing. And Nikita who before had been known to lounge up against all the girls’ gates, quietened down and it seemed he only knew one road, the way to Sonya’s. And either the two of them would see Sonya home, or Alyosha would alone; she wouldn’t allow Nikita to.

“Once Nikita was late getting back, having gone on a visit to a neighbouring village, and Alyosha and Sonya sat on the bench alone. I’m loth to admit it, but I hid behind the fence to hear what they were saying. They were silent, and I couldn’t see anything behind the fence, perhaps they are kissing each other, I thought. Then suddenly I heard:

“‘Alyosha!’

“‘What?’

“‘Are there people living on the moon? I’ve heard there are... Is it true?’

“‘No. It’s too cold. The moon’s a dead planet.’

“‘That’s a pity. I’d like to live there, then I’d be able to see all of the earth at once.’

“‘That’s impossible,’ said Alyosha. ‘You’d only see half of it.’

“‘It would be better than our street anyway. It’s boring here...’

“To tell the truth, that conversation gave me the willies. I felt as if



I was in a graveyard. I withdrew and took a peep at the moon: it looked happy and content, there was an iridescent circle round it. There's no making her out, I thought to myself: she dances till the sparks fly up from under her heels, her eyes are like stars, or she sings in a low, soft voice, the words going straight to the heart and then, suddenly, it's as if she is lamenting someone. She's an enigma, alright!

"About a week later towards evening we all gathered on the chalk cliff. At first, as was usual, we sang together in chorus, then the jokes and banter began. Olya Boyaryshnikova, an attractive girl with a full bosom, good-natured if rather dull-witted, said to her intended:

"What about tying up my shoelace, it's come undone... It will be a fat lot of use asking once I'm married, you'll be on the bottle and I'll be under lock and key!"

"Not on your life!" said her red-haired betrothed with a swagger. "That's not a man's job."

"Tie it up," Sonya admonished him.

"And I said that sort of thing's not for the likes of us," the lad repeated and walked off.

"Sonya Khmelkova looked at Alyosha and Nikita who as always, when in company, were sitting side by side. Then slowly, in the middle of a general silence, she pulled a handkerchief edged in chain stitch out of her sleeve and threw it down on the path.

"According to the saying," she said. "The man who loves me will pay court to me till his dying day!.." Who's ready to serve Sonya Khmelkova, eh?"

"Probably any of the lads would have been willing to retrieve Sonya's handkerchief for her, but under Nikita's stern eye no one dared to move. Nikita looked at Alyosha who was sitting motionless, his lips pressed tight together, his permanently questioning gaze directed into the distance, only a quickly throbbing vein in his neck giving away his emotion.

A minute went by in tense silence, then Nikita slowly got up, retrieved the handkerchief and, brushing the white dust from his trousers, sat down in the same place again.

"See how devoted I am?" he said. "That's the second time I've picked up your handkerchief."

"Thank you," said Sonya laughing and she picked a daisy and gave it to him. "You've earned that, wear it and don't lose it!"

"I won't," Nikita said with a short laugh. "The day you marry me,

I'll give you my boots to pull off and return your flower to you. That's how I'll show my gratitude!

"You won't be able to wait that long!"

"I'm obstinate, I can wait when I want to..."

"Does that mean you love me? Come on, admit it in front of everyone!"

"I love you," said Nikita.

"In vain..."

"Not for your sake, for mine. I like the feeling and I always get my own way in the end."

"Chatting to Nikita, Sonya looked at Alyosha. But the latter got to his feet, stood for a while in indecision and walked off.

"Come back Alyosha," Nikita called after him. 'We were only joking.'

"Not answering, Alyosha continued on his way. And in order to relieve the tension, the boys and girls began joking and teasing each other again. And Sonya sat silently, her arms round her knees, her head falling lower and lower and there were bitter tears in her eyes. In the evening, having got rid of Nikita, she sat moping on the bench and the next day she despatched her timid aunt — we were astonished that she'd managed to persuade her — to summon Alyosha. And not worrying about what people might think, or the gossip, she waited for him by the door. And once again three voices were to be heard singing in unison...

"This went on till the autumn when Alyosha left the village altogether. He walked off down the road covered with leaves to a school for peasant youth, about seven miles away. Before he went, he asked:

"You won't forget me?"

"No, not for as long as I live!"

"What about Nikita?"

"What about him?"

"Are you fond of him?"

"Yes. But my heart's with you. Put your hand on my heart. Hear it beating? Its beating for you ... for you ... for you! Come home as often as you can."

"I will."

"And true, Alyosha did come home, only not very often: his studies and the job he and his fellow-students had been given of encouraging cultural activities in the villages round about, didn't leave him much time. And at get-togethers Sonya would keep Nikita at arm's length, going home alone or with a friend. During the winter Alyosha came

home for two weeks and one evening, after a get-together, he and Sonya spent the whole night walking in the snowy street: arm round her shoulders, cheek to cheek, anyone would have thought in the darkness that they were one and the same person.

"Once, when they were sitting on the porch, Sonya again complained of being bored.

"I'd give my eyes to be an actress,' she said.

"Go to school then.'

"Where do actresses go to school? I've no idea.'

"Join the Komsomols. They've a club where you can study and sing songs.'

"No, Komsomol life is not for me. I'm the centre of attention here, and there I'd be a nobody.'

"You're like Nikita,' Alyosha said, 'proud.'

"Yes, there is no telling Nikita and me apart.'

"Try and be led by your mind, rather than your heart...'

"Can't, my heart's too strong...'

"Alyosha spent a long time attempting to persuade her, she listened to him rather inattentively, and then got up.

"Let's be going, it's cold here.' Suddenly, taking the initiative, she pressed up against him and kissed him.

"You've got brains, Alyosha, you're a good boy, when you go I'll watch and watch after you and call you softly, so softly no one will hear. And you'll think it's the snow pattering down, but it will be me. And when a warm wind starts to blow, caressing your cheeks you'll think the spring has come, but it will be me, me...'

"Sonya, what's come over you?"

"Nothing, Alyosha, I'm joking... Let's go!"

"I once asked Sonya why she was tormenting Alyosha. She pretended not to understand:

"What d'you mean, tormenting him? It's much worse for Nikita and he doesn't complain.'

"Nor does Alyosha. But how is it all going to end?"

"Too much love is destructive." D'you know who told me that? An old doctor from the hospital. Alyosha lives for his books, knowledge. He's going to have to keep his head to the grindstone for ten years. You can't love two things at once, it's too painful.'

"Are you jealous?"

"Yes. I have to come first! But how can I say that to him? I can't...'

"Tell him, all the same...'

"'Know what?' said Sonya, angrily. 'Get lost with your advice, I'm sad enough as it is. Be off with you!'"

"What could I do? She was right though: Alyosha was the first person in our village to go off to school and, having taken the plunge, he'd made it easier for others to follow him. And his parents and we, his friends, were proud of him and worried that Sonya might deflect him from his goal. He had a hard enough time of it, as it was. But there was no point in talking to her about this because, if we had, she would have gone against us and it would have made things even worse.

"A year passed and summer set in. One warm evening I was sitting on the chalk cliff to which Alyosha Kruglov had swum on that pitch dark August night. Feeling out of sorts for no particular reason, I had wandered there by chance. I sat lost in thought. Suddenly I heard voices I recognized: Alyosha and Sonya were approaching. I wanted to get up and greet them, but then I thought better of it and decided I wouldn't intrude: they'd walk past and that would be that. Having walked by though, they stopped. I've no idea what had taken place between them before this, again it was Sonya who spoke up first:

"'Go on, Alyosha. You're brainy and you've got a long road ahead of you. I'll just be a weight round your neck. I'm not cut out for that sort of thing! When you become famous though I'll enjoy boasting that you were once mine.'"

"Alyosha was very tense, he stood without looking round him, breaking off the twigs of an emaciated lilac bush which didn't have a single flower left on it.

"'Are you fond of Nikita?'"

"'And you too... But I'm all he's got in the world and I feel sorry for him.'"

"'For me too?'"

"'No, not for you. Well, perhaps for you too, a little.'"

"'He's waiting for you?'"

"'Yes.'"

"'Sonya, dear Sonya, don't go... Let's go home and think things over.'"

"She shook her head, sighing gently:

"'No.'"

"'Don't go, Sonya ... you might do something you'll regret!'"

"'Could be... Then there will be a wedding within the week. I don't want to though, only...'"

"Don't go!"

"Not saying a word, she straightened up, like someone about to plunge into the water, then pressing her body up against his for a split second, she moved away and began walking quickly down the path — the same path onto which she had once thrown her handkerchief — she walked downwards, along the steep side of the cliff, to the dark garden where, presumably, Nikita was waiting for her. Giving a strangled sob, Alyosha lent over the edge of the cliff.

"Sonya!"

"There was no answer. All one could hear were hurried footsteps and the noise of falling pebbles. And again Alyosha's plaintive cry rang out:

"Sonya!"

"A minute went by, then two, perhaps even five. The footsteps became fainter and then died away altogether. Far below, at the turning, a blob of light flashed, then went out, merging into the darkness of the garden. Alyosha shouted for the third time:

"Sooo-n-ya!"

"A cold, metallic echo bounced off the riverside osiers on the opposite bank of the Desna then, slightly fainter, off the willow grove by the creek and then, almost inaudibly, like the whirring of a bee's wings, off the forest itself, eventually dying down altogether. There was a full moon overhead and another seventy moons were reflected in the river and lakes below, while above, on the chalky cliff, Alyosha, with his grey, permanently questioning eyes which never flinched whatever the threat or danger, sat sobbing his heart out.

"And so ends the story of a first love."

The Captain got up, struggled with a match and lit a cigarette. Then he walked, the hay crackling underfoot, to the door of the tent and pulled back the flap. A piece of shining water showed up in the narrow, rectangular opening, beyond this over the flats there was a white strip of mist and further on still a high, oblong shape, with eroded edges.

"You see?" said the Captain. "It's all gleaming. That's the chalk cliff I was talking about."

The full moon was high in the sky, covering everything that fell within our field of vision with a shimmering, greenish light. And for a brief second it seemed to us that a plaintive cry hung in the air, "Sooo-n-ya!". The Captain shivered, probably from the dew, and, fastening up the flap, lay down.

"And is that all?" asked Sashka, a shade of reproach in his voice.

"Yes."

"And where's Sonya now? And Nikita?"

"She's not very far from here in the forest, lying in her grave. I'm not sure of the exact place, I've never been there. She got on the wrong side of the Germans when they occupied our village. As far as I remember in a moment of fury she attacked a German corporal with an axe. They killed her on the edge of the forest when she was trying to escape to the partisans. They were too frightened to come up to her though. At night the partisans picked up her body and buried her. Nikita is still living in the village. He went off to his daughter in the Urals — she's a doctor — but came back, he pined for home too much."

"And where's Alyosha?"

Wrapping himself up in his blanket, the Captain didn't answer.

*Translated by Amanda Calvert*

# Yuri Kazakov

## MANKA



*To Konstantin Paustovsky*

1

It was thirty versts from Vazintsy to Zolotitsa. There was no road, only a lonely trail overgrown with moss and even mushrooms. Sometimes Manka thought that if it wasn't for her using that trail every day to deliver the mail, it would have disappeared long ago among the undergrowth, leaving you to wander about the woods like a lost soul.

Manka was an orphan.

"Dad got drowned in a gale," she said, looking down and passing a pointed tongue over her lips. "And Mother took her own life before the year was up. Missed him terribly. One evening she went out of the house and ran down to the sea across the ice. Ran down to the glade, tied her clothes up in a bundle on the ice, and threw herself into the water."

Then, reddening, she added haltingly:

"Mother was a bit wild, you know..."

There was something wild and queer about Manka too. Something slumberous and veiled could be felt in her silence, in her vague smile, in her downcast greenish eyes. At her mother's funeral four years ago, Manka, listless, apathetic, eyes fixed on the ground, had suddenly raised her eyelashes and looked over the funeral crowd with such languidly audacious, strange eyes, that the men coughed to cover up their confusion and the women stopped wailing, blanching with fear.

Manka had been working as a postwoman these last two years. At seventeen, she had tramped enough miles to take her to Vladivostok. But she loved her job. At home life was drab, shoddy and empty. There wasn't an animal in the house, the sky peeped through the holes

in the roof, which hadn't been mended for ever so long, and the stove hadn't been heated for half a year.

Thin, tall, long-legged, Manka walked with swift ease, hardly ever tiring. Her hair would fade over the summer, her legs and arms would redden, then darken, her face grow thin, and her eyes greener and more piercing than ever.

A steady sea breeze fanned her face, wafting up the heady tang of seaweeds and bringing a sweet ache into her heart. In August luxuriant scarlet flowers blossomed along the banks of dark, brawling, yellow-foaming brooks, cluttered with windfalls. Manka would pick them and tie them up into heavy bouquets. Resting in the shade of grey fir trees crippled by the northern wintry winds, she would adorn herself with daisies and dark blue juniper berries, imagining herself a bride.

She walked with glad free ease when there was little mail. But sometimes a lot of packages, wrappers and magazines arrived, and Manka would then have a big wicker basket harnessed to her back, packed tight and heavy.

"Well, lass?" the post office manager would sing out. "Will you manage it? Or should we send for a horse?"

"I'll manage," Manka would answer huskily, flushing pink and wriggling her shoulder-blades to adjust the basket more comfortably.

After the first mile her back would begin to ache and her feet grow heavy. But then what a joy were those days among the fishermen at the fishing-grounds! What great fun it was, how carefully, slowly, amid boisterous laughter, the fishermen filled in and signed the receipts, and how they all loved Manka on those days!

"Come on, lass!" they would shout to her. "Dump that basket o' yours, you've got plenty of time. Sit down and have some fish soup with us. Mitka, a spoon!"

And some tow-headed Mitka would make a dash for the cellar, wipe the spoon on a cloth and hand it facetiously to Manka with a low bow.

"Give her more salmon!" the men would shout from all sides. And Manka, blushing and lowering her eyes, would sit down and eat, taking care not to swallow noisily, and feeling grateful to the fishermen for the care and affection they showed her.

With just newspapers and letters, on the other hand, the going was easy. The basket straps did not cut her shoulders, and the things one could fill one's eyes with on the way, the thoughts that filled one's mind! There were three fishing places on Manka's beat on the way to Zolotitsa. Her coming was always looked forward to eagerly and



she never disappointed people. She would appear in time, have tea with red bilberries, tell the news, deliver the mail, and return to Zolotitsa in the evening and spend the night there. In the morning she would collect the return mail and go back to Vazintsy.

## 2

The first fishing place from Vazintsy was called Voronya. Four fishermen lived there with a cook, and in the summer, when the nights goldened, a fifth joined them — Perfily Volokitin.

Black-haired, close-cropped, with a taut small face, he was demobilised in the spring, spent two months at home and was about to go to town when he suddenly took up with Lenka — the prettiest and sauciest girl in the village, over whom the boys in the club had had many a fight — and he decided to stay, took on a job as fisherman at Voronya.

He came to the fishing place with his accordion, and often played on it, while gazing abstractedly at the sea. He was habitually cheerful, efficient and competent in a soldierly way, willingly undertook the heaviest work, and in the evenings he shaved, sewed a dazzling under-collar to his army tunic, polished his boots, put on his cap at a jaunty angle and went off to the village club, whence he returned every time at daybreak.

He was also strong, turbulent, and adroit, a tireless dancer, ready-witted and mocking in conversation, and Manka, on meeting him in the club and handing him letters or newspapers, would suddenly start blushing and lower her eyes. At nights, she would lie awake for hours, thinking of Perfily, of his face and voice, his words and laughter, imagining, with flaming cheeks, that she was living with Perfily in a high-roofed new cottage with windows facing the sea and they had everything they wanted. Falling asleep, she would knock her knees against the wall and mutter in her sleep.

She spent the night at Zolotitsa in a stuffy overheated hut in which eight men — a team of carpenters — slept, when suddenly, towards the morning, she dreamt of Perfily. It was a vivid, strange, and shameless early-morning dream, and Manka woke up at once, her greenish eyes dilated. She sat up with a pounding heart.

The carpenters sleeping on the floor and bunks snored, the white night glimmered pallidly outside the steamy windows, and Manka choked with silent sobs at the sudden realisation that she loved Per-

filly. She shuddered with pity for herself, for her thin, still childish body, shuddered with hatred for the beautiful Lenka, and at the thought that her whole life was now maimed and ruined. It was not until dawn, worn out, overcome by the heat, that she at last fell asleep, her face wet with tears.

She was terrified, after that morning, to come near the fishermen's hut. She was afraid to betray herself, afraid of the fishermen's coarse laughter. She trembled and went cold at the sight of Perfily, and her heart sank, her lips became parched and a soft pain rose in her breast at the sound of his voice.

Lovesick, more dead than alive, she left Voronya, gradually quickening her step almost to a run, struck deep into the forest, threw herself face downward into the dry moss and had a good long cry, weeping with joy, and love, and loneliness, and frustration. Several times she wandered about the woods aimlessly, smiling and talking to herself.

Sometimes she came down to the sea, sat down on a boulder, shrinking under the warming rays of the sun, gazed at the gulls and the blue-green sheet of the sea, swaying and muttering: "Gulls, darling gulls... Carry my love to him!" And she recalled, as if in a dream, her old grandmother, long since dead, long since departed from this world, recalled her tales, her keenings, and the wild prophetic words came of their own and found utterance on her lips: "And I, God's slave Manka, shall go forth with blessings and signs of the cross... From door to door, from gate to gate, out into the open field... And so would he creak, and sicken, and burn by fire stricken, and neither would he live, nor be, nor eat, nor drink!" Sheer terror gripped her, her heart beat wildly, her hands grew clammy, and Perfily at that moment became more desirable than ever, more inaccessibly handsome than ever.

The sea was motionless, silkily smooth, barely rising and falling, as if breathing. Light bright clouds drifted across the sky and the sun hid behind them, shining smudgily. And way out there, over the hunchbacked blue cape, a fan tracery of white-blue columns of light fell upon the sea, and the water there shone with an intense gleam, and seemed to swell and reek. It was a fine, gladdening summer, unusually warm.

One day in September, Manka, grown still wilder over the summer, approached the fishing place and stopped warily. It had been thick

weather since the morning, with a wind and a choppy sea. There had been a brief pelting rain at daybreak and the sodden hut with its dingy panes looked darker, autumnal. The sea had washed ashore bunches of seaweed that day, and there were a lot of moist-red jelly-fishes and small yellow-brown starfishes on the sand.

The evening before a lot of salmon had been caught in the traps, and that day being a patron saint's feast, the fishermen decided to make it a holiday. They loaded the salmon into a boat and went off together to hand the catch in at the fish-receiving station, and while they were at it, to steam themselves in the bath, spend the night at home and have a good time.

Perfily went along with the rest. He went to the club in the evening, listened to the accordion, played a little on it himself in a perfunctory manner, then dropped it, started eating sunflower seeds, cracked jokes in an overloud voice, then had a drink with the boys out in the street. His dark handsome eyes squinted and his voice got slightly hoarse with excitement. Shouldering the boys and girls out of the way, he stepped into the dancing circle with a rolling gait, tilted back his small dryish face, lazily closed his eyes, stamped his creaking leather boots, and with an air of unconcern, amid the joyous guffaws of the boys and the feigned disgust of the girls, began to sing bawdy rhymes.

Breathlessly, hungrily, he watched Lenka the whole evening. And when the hall was cleared and tickets were being sold for a film show, he found her among the crowd, grasped her arm, led her out into the passage, where the husks of the sunflower seeds crunched underfoot and there was a smell of lavatories, and pressed her against the wall, his face growing whiter and whiter and his eyes squinting still more as he whispered:

"Let's go to your place... You're driving me mad! Let's sit at home..."

"I'll get all the sitting I want at home," Lenka came back perkily without looking at him, all intent as she was on what was going on in the club.

"So you don't want to?" Perfily said in a tone of impotent menace, breathing in the smell of face powder and Lenka's hair. "Found somebody else? One of the sailor boys, eh? Mind you don't rue it! Mind you don't swallow your tears..."

"Let go!" Lenka demanded in a whisper. She violently wrenched herself free and without a glance at Perfily went back into the club, slamming the door hard. Perfily for the first time noticed what a tantalisingly high breasts she had, what large greedy hands, what a cruelly

beautiful face, and how provocatively and brazenly she swung her hips when she walked.

He went out into the dimly lit street, out into the bracing cold, tore open his tunic, buttons and all, took his cap off and went home, quivering with rage and shame, stamping hard on the wooden sidewalks. Leaving the house, despite his mother's remonstrances, he took with him a bottle of vodka, some bread and back fat, went down to the sea, got into his boat and within two hours was at his fishing hut.

Inside, flushed from the savage effort of rowing, he lighted the oil-lamp, poured out a glass of vodka without sitting down at the table, tossed it off and clenched his teeth, blinking and rumpling his wiry hair, which had grown long over the summer. Then he went outside, sat down on a log, lighted up and stared glassy-eyed into the darkness, into the cold of the sea, where in summer the huge dull red disk of the sun rolled along the skyline at night and where now the pale blue columns of the Northern Lights kept flickering and glimmering and wearily fading.

The next morning, when Manka entered the hut, alerted by the unusual quiet, Perfily was sleeping on his cot in the corner, legs sprawled, muscular belly bared and head covered with his padded jacket. Hearing the door bang, he woke up, stared dully at Manka and rubbed his face.

"Ah, it's you," he said sullenly and sat down at the table, propping his head up in his hands. "Any letters?"

"No," Manka said. She sat down on the bunk and shyly drew her legs under it.

"Then what have you brought?"

"Newspapers." Manka coughed and licked her lips.

"Newspapers!" Perfily stared gloomily at the window. "We're in for a gale. It's likely to tear away the nets. What's happening in the village? The bastards have gone to have a good time!"

He heaved himself up, went over to the pail to have a drink and glanced at the shrinking figure of Manka.

"What's the matter with you today, you're sort of..." he said vaguely, and tossing his head back, he began to drink.

"Sort of what?" Manka murmured, blushing a dusky red, and leaned forward, smoothing the dress on her knees.

"Still living all alone?"

"Yes."

"Must be lonely," Perfily said without expression, looking through the window.

"I don't know..." Manka made a feeble gesture with her hand, coughed, went up to the pail and also had a drink, thrilled at the thought that she was drinking from the same mug Perfily had just drunk from.

"I must be going," she said huskily, sitting down again and raising frightened eyes to Perfily. But Perfily did not hear her — he was looking out of the window.

"A gale's blowing up!" he muttered. "Those damned forecasters! Wrong again."

Manka, too, looked out of the window. The sea had darkened, the surf was pounding the shore, and the wind was whistling in the drying lines. The waves rolled in swiftly, foaming and tumbling over each other, and along the horizon a purple-black bank swelled and drew nearer.

"A gale's whipping up and they're gone to have a good time!" Perfily repeated savagely, reminding himself of Lenka. He went behind the curtain and started to draw on his tarpaulin trousers and jacket.

"Where are you going?" Manka gasped. "Do you want to drown?"

"Where! The traps are in the sea, somebody's got to haul 'em in!" Perfily muttered and went outside. Manka listened open-mouthed to the wind, then looked through the window at the purple scud, which had widened considerably in that minute, and rushed out after Perfily. The wind hit her hard in the face. Perfily was busy at the boat when Manka came running up to him.

"What is it?" Perfily turned a surly face to her, and without waiting for her reply, he began to push the boat over the rollers into the water.

"I'm going with you," Manka said, putting her shoulder to the boat.

"What next! Kindergarten!" Perfily yelled. The boat was already bouncing over the sand. "Go back into the hut!"

"I won't!" Manka said, clutching the boatside with white fingers. "Haven't I seen the sea before?"

"Jump in then!" Perfily suddenly shouted in a gay, daredevil tone, grinning. "Tumble in!"

Manka leapt into the boat, and made for the stern, lurching from side to side. Perfily, red in the face, backside upthrust, waist-deep in the water, pushed the boat, jumped, fell on the side on his stomach, rolled in, snatched the oars and swung the boat round to the sea. Within a minute they were bowling along, rising and falling, towards the black stakes of the fish pound, set within two hundred metres of the shore. Manka pulled hard, licking the salt spray from her lips. The wind

whipped her hair. "I've forgotten my kerchief," she thought. "Oh, we'll drown, oh, what a wild wind!" And looked with eyes full of love at Perfily's flushed, tensed, upturned face.

They came up to the first trap, and hurriedly, afraid even to look at the approaching black patch, began to pull out the stakes and stow them in the boat together with the nets. Manka alternately hauled in the net and bailed the water out. Soon her arms and back were aching, her dress was wet and hitched up, baring her strong narrow thighs, blotchy with the cold, and revealing the edge of pink drawers. Manka felt ashamed, but she could not find a minute to pull her dress straight. Perfily was not even looking at her. The stakes were driven in hard, and he had to shake them loose. The boat was being tossed about, the waves grew higher and higher, and he had to hurry.

After fifteen minutes the trap was removed and they started back towards the shore. The boat sat deep in the water. Perfily pulled furiously at the oars, glancing at something that was approaching from the sea. Manka sat facing the shore, and she rowed and bailed out the water, afraid to look back.

"Stop!" Perfily shouted wildly. "We won't be able to ride in. Throw the trap overboard, it won't be carried away from here!"

They threw the trap overboard — it was instantly swept inshore with a roar — and turned back into the sea. Now Manka was sitting facing the sea, more dead than alive. There was neither sky, nor cloud, nor sea in the distance, only a black, nebulous wrack, shamelessly, insolently agitated and dishevelled, and amid this blackness the wave-crests alone showed up coldly and cruelly white. They barely managed to reach the second pound through the wind. Perfily bent low over the oars and threw himself back at each stroke. Manka's arms felt like breaking.

And again Perfily grabbed the stakes, shook them loose, again the boat tossed and tumbled, and when the bow reared and lifted out of the water, taking a list, Perfily's head and arms disappeared over the side. Eyes rounded with terror, Manka then saw only his tensed backside and bandied legs in wet shiny high boots. The stake, wrenched free, leapt upwards. Perfily threw himself back and hauled in the net. This trap contained several salmon and squirming bar-shaped whitefish.

And then, the storm broke in earnest. The waves were covered with foam, the spray flew high, and a continuous roar came from the beach, where the monstrous inrush across the sand nearly reached the fishing hut. The sea began to take on the colour of chocolate. The second trap was practically inboard and only the net of the right side

remained to be hauled in, when the boat climbed a wave, stood up almost vertically, then dropped on its side and capsized, with the stunned and choking Manka underneath it.

She understood nothing in the darkness, all she wanted was light, air, she wanted to see Perfily, but she banged her head against the seat, and the sinking net got entangled in her feet, dragging her down with it. "My God!" she groaned inwardly. "Oh, mamma, I'm lost, I'm done for!"

Something scraped over her leg, and she kicked out. Clutching the seat and pressing her face close to the boat's bottom, where there was still a little air smelling of fish, she started howling. And again, rough angry hands slid over her legs, grasped her thighs, her dress, jerked her down cruelly, and Manka choked, gasped, fought now like an animal, twisting to break loose, but the same hurting hands pulled her roughly upwards, pressed her to the boat's ribbed bulging side. Spitting, bared backbone tensed, Perfily clambered up onto the keel, dragging Manka up after him.

"What are you dangling under the boat for, silly fool!" he said happily, speaking into her ear and pressing her close to him, while he gripped the slippery keel. "Sit tight! We're being swept inshore!"

Tossed about, coughing, blinded by her tears, gasping from the moist salty wind and spray, Manka clutched the keel with one hand, her other arm round Perfily's neck, numb with cold and fright.

"Never mind!" Perfily yelled jubilantly, his boots slithering over the boat's bottom. "Never say die! He who hasn't lived by the sea hasn't known misery!"

The sea was roaring like a huge infuriated beast and like a beast it heaved the capsized boat up and down on its back, carrying it nearer and nearer to the shore. Within half an hour the boat, its rounded sides gleaming, was dancing in the roaring surf. A wave caught it up and carried it ashore, and then the wave broke below and the boat, surrounded by hissing foam, first slowly, then at gathering speed, raced back, to again rise on a wave and hurl itself upon the beach.

All of a sudden there came a lull, and one could hear the hiss of the water as it rolled back, and from behind, a growing roar as from an oncoming train. Perfily looked back and all but let go of the keel. Sweeping down on them was a sinister, swirling, spluttering breaker. It struck the boat before it could climb the wave, turned it over and swept it shorewards, crashing it into the sand. The last thing Manka remembered was hurtling madly towards the beach,

hitting the sand with her face, back and elbows, her arms and legs twisted up under her.

She came to herself on the beach. Perfily was kneeling beside her, raising her head. Manka suddenly felt ashamed. She pushed him away and sat up, pulling her dress down over her bared legs. She felt sick and dizzy. Black spots floated before her eyes.

"You're alive!" Perfily cried, overjoyed. "Wait a minute, I'll soon be back."

He ran heavily across the sand to where the shiny boat was wriggling about in the foam like a living thing, waded into the water waist-deep, caught the tip and dragged the boat onto the beach. Then, wading again into the foaming surf, he grasped the fish trap, and, bending down almost to the sand on quivering legs, he hauled it ashore too. Panting, the wet skirts of his jacket and the tops of his boots flapping, he returned to Manka. She was still sitting, too weak to stand up.

"Come, come!" Perfily said cheerily in a tone of mock reproach. "That's all right... Here, hold me round the neck, I'll carry you!" he shouted, bending down and looking anxiously into her face.

But Manka turned away and stood up, staggering like a drunken person, a wan apologetic smile on her white face. They walked side by side. Perfily put his arm round her to support her and felt her thin shoulder-blades. He grew more and more animated as he trudged along, gazing at the sea, talking, laughing at himself, at Manka, at the gale, as if, a minute ago, he had not been holding onto the boat's upturned keel, yelling hoarsely at the top of his voice, straining and staring in horror at the oncoming waves.

4

Inside the hut Perfily lighted the stove, pulled off his wet clothes and changed, brought out a pair of trousers, a sweater and a jacket for Manka, went out into the passage and started smoking greedily there, examining his trembling, bruised hands.

"Finished there?" he called out a minute later.

"Oh! Wait a minute!" Manka answered, frightened, and began to hurry. With an effort she pulled off her wet clinging dress and slip. Getting into the dry clothes, she had trouble with the unaccustomed long trousers, and glancing down, she touched the incipient bulge of her breast and drew a painful sign.

"Well?" Perfily shouted again from the passage.

"Come in!" Manka said embarrassedly, and with eyes lower-



ed, feeling shy in these men's clothes, she hurriedly carried out her own wet clothes, wrung them out and hung them up to dry in the wind.

"Now then!" Perfily greeted her when she came in. "Come over here! We're going to do some doctoring according to the last word in science and technology..."

He seated Manka on a bench at the table, got out yesterday's bottle of vodka from under the bed and poured out a glass for her and himself.

"Here goes!" he said hotly, looking into her face. "Come on, drink! Cheerio! This will keep the cold away. Happy landing to you..."

He tossed his glass off first, and immediately poured tea out into mugs. Manka drank hers too, gasping and shaking her head. She quickly became tipsy, her face grew rosy and her green eyes glimmered. Aghast, her heart in her mouth, she felt but a single desire, which grew more and more clamorous — that Perfily should take her in his arms and kiss her.

And Perfily, glancing at her, suddenly fell silent and paled. He pushed back his mug of tea, got up, went out of the hut with a light catlike tread, and took a quick look round. The beach was deserted. He went back, sat down in a strained manner, his eyes now frankly raking her face with its flaming cheeks, moist, curling hair, and drooping golden eyelashes, realising now the cause of her silence, of her queer behaviour, her lowered eyes and husky voice. The sea boomed hollowly and disturbingly outside, and in the hut it was warm and dry, the stove crackled, and it smelt of fish.

"How old are you?" he asked quickly in a changed voice.

"I must be going..." Manka said weakly, getting up and sitting down again.

"How old are you?" Perfily repeated, trying to look into her eyes.

"Nineteen," she whispered, lying, and felt her hands grow cold and her head begin to swim. And suddenly, with a little shiver, came the recollection of her summer's anguish and yearning, her tears, all the shame of her first secret love, all the despair of the ghostly white nights, and a sweet dread seized her, for there, beside her, sat Perfily, gazing at her with those terrifying eyes, making her dreams come true. "Goodness me!" she thought. "He'll throw himself at me in a minute! Oh, mamma, what am I to do!" She looked at him wild-eyed.

"Ekhl!" he cried out in mock desperation, and with an easy pretence at similar wildness, he moved up to her on the bench, seized her, bent her head back, and with eyes asquint, kissed her long and ravenously on the mouth, while his disengaged hand shamelessly explored

her thin body. Manka froze with terror.

"What's the matter with you!" she cried, struggling free. "What the hell! Damn you!"

"I've got a weak heart..." Perfily muttered in confusion, getting up.

"You fool!" Manka shouted hoarsely, on the verge of tears. "Kiss those knockabouts of yours. Don't you dare touch me! I ... I'm not just anybody!"

"Manya, Manyusha..." Perfily pleaded in dismay. "I didn't mean anything, I meant well!"

"I'm not just anybody! Go and kiss that Lenka of yours! I've never ... I've never been kissed," Manka brought out with an effort, all atremble, then suddenly turned away, drawing a shuddering breath, unbuttoned her jacket and flung it on the floor. "Go away, damn you!" she said in a low voice. "I've got to... I've got to deliver the mail..."

Quivering with fury and a sort of sweet, vengeful feeling, she changed, no longer fearing that Perfily might come in, picked up her bag, and with head bent low, she went out, not even saying goodbye to Perfily who was hanging about in the entry, smoking.

She had gone a fairly long way, when Perfily, bareheaded, and in old slippers on his bare feet, caught up with her.

"I had these knocking about," he muttered, thrusting some chocolates into her bag. "Eat them on the way. Don't be sore, Manya. Forgive me, will you? I've finished with Lenka!" he said with sad finality. "She's a bitch. Just anybody's girl!"

"Go away!" Manka said, turning aside. "Leave me alone!"

"Will you come to the club on Saturday?" Perfily asked, stepping out quickly at her side.

"I've got the mail," Manka said, still looking away.

"Sunday then!" Perfily persisted. "I have something to tell you... Will you come, Manya?"

"I don't know," she murmured after a pause, and quickened her step. Perfily dropped behind.

"Catch me coming!" Manka was thinking, her head bent low, as she listened to the roar of the sea muffled by the distance. "What does he take me for, a fool! Why should I go? Trying to suck up to me with chocolates!" She dipped her hand into the bag, felt for the sweets, and grasped them, but did not throw them away as she had at first intended. She walked along with the sweets clutched in her hand.

At the bend she looked back as if someone had prodded her

in the back. Perfily was standing on the path, on the spot where he had dropped behind, gazing after her. Seeing Manka turn round, he raised his hand, and Manka hurried along almost at a run. After half a mile she sat down, took a look round, turned off into the undergrowth, among the golden-yellow birches, and lay down there in the moss, her face on her bag. "Oh, what has happened! How am I going to deliver them the mail now!" she thought.

Her face was burning, her head swimming, dizzy with the fresh, clean fisherman's smell of Perfily. She saw his dark, mad, turbulent eyes close to her own, and she froze again in terror, reliving the fright, the joy and shame of that eventful day. And the wild, prophetic words of that charm, now struck upon her ear with a cheerful, vindictive, jubilant sound: "And so would he creak, and sicken, and burn by fire stricken, and neither would he live, nor be, nor eat, nor drink!"

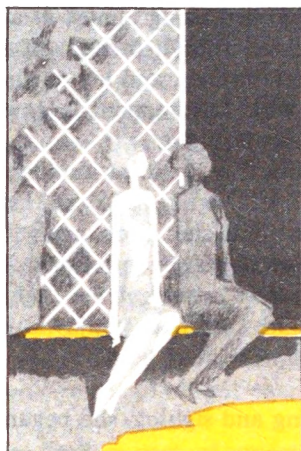
And then, whimpering and sighing, she began eating the chocolates.

*Translated by Bernard Isaacs*



# Fazil Iskander

## THE LETTER



**A**t the age of fifteen I received by letter an impassioned declaration of love. I have retained to this day the impression that the words, which blazed as I read them, were written in gold, not in ordinary ink.

The moment before the postwoman handed me the letter I had run down the stairs of the two-storeyed house where we lived, with a length of electric wire in my hand. The idea was to keep hold of it to the bottom of the stairs while all the time the mysterious power of the current was beating through my body. With the sparking end of the wire held against the metal banister of the stairs, I would run down as fast as I could, giving off my own violet sparks in all directions.

There had been a thunderstorm the night before, and this had caused the wire to be broken. The major, and fatal, portion of the current had obviously been drawn off by the roof of our house, but I was free to play with the rest.

It was spring. The ornate railings of the banister were hidden in the even more ornate tangle of flowering wisteria. The heavy flowers hung in cascades all the way up the outside of the staircase. They were mauve like the electric sparks flying off the ends of my fingers.

Halfway up the first flight of stairs was the door into the hall of the communal wash-rooms.

The people living in our yard would often run there, and as soon as they touched the banister I would turn on the current for them. At this they would mostly either cry out, or silently take a wild jump into the wash-room hall; but, despite the variety of reactions, no one changed their route.

I was still holding the wire in my hand as I read the letter. I felt at once that my game was no longer necessary, that it had come to an end, possibly for good, so I dropped the wire and ran into the house.

Although the letter was unsigned, I guessed straight away who had written it. It was a girl who had been in our class two years earlier. Two years before the letter we had been separated, our school had been divided into one for boys and one for girls, just like the old grammar schools. Since then I had not once seen her or even thought of her. We had been next to each other on the class register and, what's more, all three of our initials had coincided. Such a coincidence could not go unnoticed. Young as we were in those days, we both felt that it was not entirely accidental. And now there was the letter.

The golden lettering flashed and trembled on the paper. I read it through several times, gratefully fell in love with the writer, tore the paper up immediately into tiny bits, and threw these bits into the waste basket.

My actions in this were motivated by a powerful patriarchal shame and the unrecognised logic of a budding socialist. The workings of this logic I would now interpret approximately as follows: the letter I had received meant happiness, but I should be ashamed of being happy, just as I would be ashamed of being well-fed among people who were starving. But since it was difficult to refuse happiness (tactics!), I would have to make a conspiracy out of it, keep it in my head, and destroy all material evidence of it.

Thus I began to walk through the streets of the town with the hope of meeting her somewhere by chance. I had a pretty vague idea of what I should do when we met. First of all, I thought, I had to approach her, of course, and then, as soon as the opportunity arose, I could offer her my heart and life, naturally, until a gravestone put an end to it.

I cannot say that I particularly hastened the meeting. As with every budding socialist, the main thing for me was to have a programme,

and that had been set out with ingenious clarity in her missive. For everything else there was a whole life ahead of us, and at the age of fifteen life is so immense that, however much of it you may waste, there's still too much of it, and it's always brimming over in its abundance.

And then, one day while I was loafing around with my friends on the main street of our town, Generalissimo Street to be precise, she walked past us with two other girls.

I had time to notice the inspired pallor of her cheek, her rapid walk and her slim figure. In those two years she had turned from a girl into a young woman, but had succeeded in remaining as slim as she had been in the seventh class, a class which had proved so fateful for our co-education.

In short, there was in evidence that source of pale pink glow which was so necessary to the burgeoning feeling of a boy of my age.

And it is nature's guile in the given situation that every boy who passes through this stage or, rather, to put it more accurately, who is given a jab, an injection, of love fever, takes this glow as a particular favour from his own personal fate, a fate which has guessed the needs of his tender soul and has, with exceptional tact and the taste of a Japanese gardener, combined in one young woman the rare qualities of the boy's fragile and fickle ideal.

Seeing her cheek blush, therefore, I had no further doubts that my guess as to the authorship of the letter was correct, but I felt that to approach her was going to be no simple matter. Although we managed to cast only a single, fleeting glance at each other, in that one instant we seemed to decide that it would be awkward right then and there, after two years, to recognise each other and say hello, especially as the secret of the letter now lay between us.

No, no! — she cried out to me in that momentary glance. Not now, not here, because if you say hello to me now, then it means you have told your friends all about my letter, and I shall die of shame.

Then I began to meet her more and more often. Sometimes she was with her elder sister, sometimes with a large group of her school-friends and a number of lads I didn't know. And I felt that each time it was becoming ever harder to approach her.

Her sister, by the way, had also been in our class, although she was a year or two older than us. I don't remember why she found herself in our class, but it was probably not from an excessive love of learning. In order to maintain absolute consistency I also avoided saying hello to the sister, a fact which she did not seem to notice. In any case

she, the sister, was a somewhat sleepy girl and, although to look at the two you would say the elder, with her delicate, heavy eyelids, her clear face and bright lips, was the more attractive, it was nonetheless not hard to sense that boys were more attracted to the younger. This was because she, the younger, radiated that particular restlessness and impatient expectancy of life's joys which was guaranteed to infect those around her.

In short, it became ever harder to approach her.

I was waiting for a romantic opportunity and, really, I was in no hurry to talk to her; there could be no hurry, as I saw it, because my whole life was now dedicated to her, and only her, anyway.

Among the young men and the girls in her company, meanwhile, there began to appear a certain soldier, a Captain, as my friends were happy to inform me.

And now I noticed that my beloved, whenever we met and she was in company with the Captain, would seem embarrassed and would hang her head. I took this embarrassment as a wonderfully touching proof of her love, it agreeably flattered my pride but was, perhaps, a little too strong.

So now I sent her meaningful glances and tried to convey to her that she should not be too embarrassed about the Captain's presence, that we two knew the great secret which joined us together, that the Captain, poor fellow, had not been sent such a letter and, judging by his advanced age, would presumably never now be sent one.

The Captain was around twenty-seven years of age, a time of life which at that early period of my own life seemed too hopelessly late for love. It was an age so advanced, perhaps, that, given the right opportunity, one could respectfully touch the medals on his chest, saying:

*Tell us, grandad, did you know then  
Why our Moscow, burnt to cinders,  
Was to the Frenchies given? \**

My secret beloved probably interpreted my glances correctly, because in time when we met and she was in company with the Captain then she almost ceased to be embarrassed, and her lips sort of curved in a hint of a smile, which I easily decided was forced guile.

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\* ...to the Frenchies — a reference to the abandonment of Moscow in 1812.— Ed.

How difficult it must have been for her, poor girl, I thought, to love one man but to have to put up with the attentions of another.

Thus, in a state of blissful imbecility, occasionally accompanying my beloved like an invisible shadow, I passed the days until the middle of summer, when she, her sister and the Captain started going to the dances in the town park.

Under the influence of the music in the park my feelings, it seemed, became tinged with bitterness.

The post-war dancing arena would shuffle in time to the music, some of it indigenous, some of it — the spoils of war. Among the crowd of dancers I would catch glimpses of her pale face raised inquiringly to the Captain. He was a tall and upright fellow, he looked down to her in a kindly way and it seemed, damn it all, as though he looked at her with a barely perceptible condescension which was an insult to me.

It is difficult to imagine something of what the awful dancing arena of those years was like. But I can see it now in my mind's eye — with its aging girls, twirling round year after year on its patch of asphalt and, seemingly, throwing out something feminine and human with every passing year, with every passing dance, until they finally achieved their professional mask with its hungry, sunken eyes. And then there were the impudent milk-sops and over-the-hill villains, the latter now engaged in more peaceable trades but still coming to the park for sentimental reminiscences. And finally there was the mandatory "leading dancer", self-appointed, working like a water-carrier, doing the side-step-shuffle, so well-known in those years, and rolling his eyes in a fit of barbershop oblivion.

Suddenly, somewhere on the edge of the dancing arena, or sometimes even in the middle, a small whirlpool of a free-for-all would start up, gradually drawing a larger and larger number of people into its vortex; it would be accompanied by whistling, shouting, and girls running in all directions.

Shame at this miserable spectacle, fear for my beloved, and for myself. Anxiety and, at the same time, a market-place curiosity to see the fighting and the blood, and at the same time a constant feeling of humiliation in the face of this overdose of general coarseness in what was happening, and at the same time the need to hide this aggravation, to curl my lips in the smile of a smart fellow who knew more than he was saying, and yet saying more than the people around him were worth.

And the main thing — the far too ignominious value which is imperceptibly attached to your person the moment you go in there. You



would have thought you yourself had reduced your value to its minimum, but apparently you hadn't reduced it enough, and you grumble at that just a little, but nobody even wants to listen to you, and they couldn't hear you anyway, probably because you are, after all, grumbling to yourself. But it seems your face nonetheless carries a mark or intimation of your displeasure, and at any moment you may be unmasked, by dint of this mark, as a freak, from the day you were born unable to hit anyone, as one of a gang, unable even to rattle off your spit at the back of an unsuspecting dude or his moll; you obviously couldn't play any sort of dirty trick, with no danger of retaliation, or sometimes even with such a threat, though without would be better.

All these feelings swarmed invisibly inside me during the days when I simply admired her on the dancing arena. Finally one of my friends just went and threw me at the bench where she was sitting out a dance with her sister and the Captain.

Laughing in my embarrassment, I introduced myself and started explaining that I was the boy from her and her sister's class of two years earlier in the school No. 2, the one that was between the stadium and the church, although neither of the girls could have forgotten the school where we'd been in the same class, if only for the simple reason that they were still pupils there (it was us boys who had been moved elsewhere).

And what's more, I didn't omit to mention that when we were in class together our names had begun with the same letters.

While I was talking, she too seemed embarrassed, now raising her head, her face blushing and paling by turns and her eyes begging me not to make a scene, now turning to her Captain, gently putting her fingers on his chest, calming him down with this small caress and at the same time setting him a little apart from our memories.

I almost forgot to mention that during my monologue, whenever my eyes met hers, I tried, with as eloquent a gaze as I could manage, to indicate that never in my whole life, never under any circumstances would anyone, especially him (there followed a romantic turn of the eyes in the Captain's direction), ever learn of the existence of that letter. And even my chaotic monologue, with its detailed explanation of where our school was to be found, had the extra intention of suggesting to the Captain that since those distant times there had been between us not only no written, nor yet any oral, communication.

I ought to point out that the Captain, realising from my opening monologue that I was not just trying to be fresh, accepted me good-humouredly.

"Kostya," he introduced himself simply, shaking my hand firmly, like a good friend.

After a short while he even went off for a turn with her sister, and they stayed away for two or three whole dances.

What bliss it was to be sitting on the bench next to her, to look in fairy-tale proximity at her pretty profile with its ever-so-slightly snub nose and slender neck, and to inhale, inhale the fragrance of her perfume, all the more intoxicating because at the time and for long afterwards I took it to be the natural smell of her own blossoming youth.

Three of my friends walked past us demonstratively several times. From their blank faces I could clearly tell that they felt insulted by my good fortune. When my eyes met theirs I smiled, much as a man suddenly raised aloft to beautiful but extremely unstable heights might smile down upon the Earth. In answer to these smiles of mine they looked at me and in their looks they suggested that I should climb down from those silly heights and discuss with them what had happened. When they had been trying to persuade me to approach her, they had obviously expected a more comical effect.

Finally one of them, the very one who had actually pushed me in the direction of the bench and who therefore seemed to feel himself most responsible for my behaviour, came up to us, apologised rather stiffly to my beloved and took me on one side.

He had been born in Leningrad, but was evacuated during the war; we reckoned, and he was happy to confirm, that he retained the cool social gloss of an hereditary Petersburger.\* After walking no more than a dozen paces he turned to me.

"I ought to tell you what an idiot you look!" he said, looking at me severely.

I recalled that it was he himself who had taken me to her, that everything was so simple and had turned out so well; then suddenly I surprised myself and, naturally, him as well, by embracing him. He pushed me away indignantly and went back to the others.

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\* *Hereditary Petersburger* — the city of Leningrad, formerly St. Petersburg, was the capital of Russia throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, and was therefore also the cultural and high-society centre of the country.—  
*Tr.*

I watched him go. He was tall and slim, and he walked with the measured tread of a military envoy.

I could never have dreamed of using the letter to blackmail her, but I felt it necessary now, as we were alone, to let her know that the letter had been received and that the great act of conjoining our souls had occurred in all its beauty and selflessness.

"Oh, tear it up!" she said as soon as I mentioned the letter, and she gently touched my shirt with her fingers. "I was so foolish then..."

"Never!" I lied hotly, putting all the truth of my state into the one word.

I meant that the feeling aroused by her letter was eternal and now nothing could be changed, and therefore this deception was the clearest form of truth. She sighed, and withdrew her hand.

For some reason I looked victoriously at the Captain, who was just then returning to our bench, leading her sister politely from the dancing arena — a feat, incidentally, of which I was still incapable.

After that day we met quite often, and spent many evenings together. There always seemed to be the four of us.

I knew very well that the Captain was courting her and not her sister, but I felt no jealousy, there was no feeling of rivalry. This was impossible, as it is impossible to be jealous of a person who has sat down at a fire, where you are sitting, and has stretched out his hands to warm them. Or rather, to continue the comparison, it is you yourself who has come out of the dank night to this fire, and it is he who was already sitting there with his old soldier's cooking-pot that's knocked about a bit already hanging over the fire, and him stirring his simple love potion in it with a spoon. So that it is he, and not you, who has moved over to make room at the fire, though it's true he hasn't stopped stirring with his spoon in the cooking-pot. And it doesn't matter that you saw the fire before he did, or rather, the fire itself noticed you and even waved to you from afar with the tongues of its flames: now you are both warming yourselves by it, and there's nothing wrong in that.

That was what I thought, taking the temporary balance of power to be harmony. Sooner or later rivalry, or something like it, was bound to arise. And arise it did.

It had happened automatically that, while we were all out together, the Captain took upon himself all the minor expenditure incurred, such as drinks, ice-cream, going into the fun-park or a visit to the pictures, though it's true this latter was a rare occurrence.

At first I would take out my own rare rouble on such occasions,

but he and she thrust it back at me with such insistence that I soon stopped taking any notice of it: there's nothing a person gets used to more quickly than free hospitality.

One day, when he was treating our mutual beloved to grape juice, and her sister and I were standing humbly by, he nodded in our direction and said:

"Roll up, Charlie's paying."

This sounded just a little bit near the knuckle. I am quite certain now that his joke was not intended to insult or humiliate me, but at the time I burned with shame and for the first time I felt an enmity towards this man who really was an excellent fellow.

The main thing was that I couldn't very well refuse, as I felt the foolish and awkward consequences of refusal, especially as the juice was already poured out and, what's particularly surprising, I still wanted to drink it, you might say even more so.

And the worst of all was that, when he gave out his invitation in the style of a rich playboy, I noticed she smiled into the glass that was already raised to her lips, and she smiled fairly maliciously. That hit me most unpleasantly, and afterwards I recalled her smile many, many times until one day I finally decided that in fact there had been no such smile, that it had been an effect of the light passing through the glass and the liquid, giving her lips that treacherous curl.

But the most horrible part of it, perhaps, was that we had already agreed to go to the pictures, and as luck would have it I had no money at all. Now, as things stood, there was no way I could go to the pictures at his expense. But to refuse point-blank would have been awkward and pointless because, by refusing, I would have to leave them, which I was loath to do.

Even before this incident, of course, I had sometimes thought that I should not take advantage of his monetary favours although, I repeat, these were fairly minimal. But in the light state of ethereal intoxication in which I constantly found myself since I had joined them, I had come to accept this hospitality as a favour between men, as if to say today you pay, but tomorrow it's my turn, although that tomorrow was always being put off to an indefinite time in the future.

Besides, there was another shade in the evaluation of the situation, but I deliberately avoided thinking it through to its conclusion, feeling that it was not a very noble thought. Yet the vague outline of this evaluation sometimes rose up in my mind's eye, and now I have no right to keep silent about it. Its essence was that it seemed to me, or possibly began to seem to me at some point, that she and I were doing

him a favour to some extent by letting him into our company, for which he paid with minor material outlays.

Of course, if we take the comparison with the fire even further, I wasn't jealous of him, of course, for his having sat down at my fire. But damn it, I knew it was burning for me, after all, and that that one and only wonderful letter, maybe, had been written with a smouldering twig snatched out of this fire!

Not only did I have no doubt that she could not have written such a letter, or any sort of love letter, to anyone else; but I was also quite sure that, having once written such a letter, a person would spend the rest of his or her life doing nothing but live up to that letter, if only he or she had enough strength to remain on a par with it, and even to think of anything else would be inconceivable.

And suddenly that offhand remark about Charlie treating everyone. On the way from the drinks stand to the cinema where we were going I tried to think of a dignified way to get out of accepting any new charity from him, but I couldn't come up with anything.

In those days our cinemas showed practically nothing but films captured abroad. As a rule these were operas, pastorales with endless little songs, or heavy-handed revues with blossoming showgirls, wide-hipped and plump like Dutch cows, if, of course, Dutch cows really are like that.

Many years later I came to the conclusion that these films expressed nothing but the tastes of the Reich's leaders.

And it was just such a film that was showing that day. It was entitled *Do Not Forget Me*, and starred the fat and sugary-voiced Gigli. Like all the other inhabitants of our provincial town I had not seen the film but, from talking to others, I knew what it was all about. I must confess that I found Gigli's voice quite pleasant to listen to, especially if I listened to it without paying too much attention to the screen.

As we approached the cinema I had a horrible feeling that in ten more minutes I would be forced to suffer yet another humiliation, which I could not bear, and I began to pour scorn on the film. After all, it was art at a pretty low level, so I didn't have to bother with either pathos or powerful arguments to tear it to pieces, especially under the circumstances.

From that particular film I moved on to all foreign films with their sugary sentimentality.

The more I tore the film to pieces, the more stubbornly my beloved's lips pouted. At that time I was not to know that trying to

stop a woman en route to a promised entertainment was no less dangerous than trying to stop the populace of ancient Rome on the road to the Coliseum.

When I had moved over from *Do Not Forget Me* to foreign films in general, she suddenly asked me:

"You're learning German, aren't you?"

"Yes, what of it?" I replied with a start.

I thought she had found a contradiction between my criticism of German films and my learning the German language. But her question held a very different import.

"Talk to Kostya," she suggested, not suspecting the genie she had let out of the bottle. "He's spent two years in Germany."

"*Sprechen Sie Deutsch?*?" I cried happily, as though I were a pure-blooded German and had just met a fellow-countryman after years of captivity in Polynesia.

"*Natürlich*," he confirmed somewhat dolefully, intimidated slightly by the alacrity of my question.

Then I was carried away. In my youth I found learning languages easy, as a result of which I still don't know any one of them properly. At this particular time I had been learning German for two years, I had had a chance to talk to some prisoners of war who had been full of praise for my pronunciation, this obviously in exchange for the cigarettes I gave them (*Prima Deutsch!*).

During the process of learning a language there occurs a feverish condition when you start muttering away in the foreign language in your sleep although, when wide awake, you still stumble and stutter as you look at the objects around you and see their vocabular designation in double vision, as it were; in short, there comes a time when your inflamed brain overcomes a sort of barrier of incompatibility between the two languages. And I was in just such a condition at this time.

I was literally stuffed full of German sayings, conversational expressions from pre-revolutionary textbooks, anti-Nazi slogans, aphorisms from Marx and Goethe, and condensed texts designed to develop in the language-learner a vigilance against potential German spies (it seemed that spies, when nervous, would start talking to the local inhabitants in German). Besides all this I knew by heart a number of Russian patriotic war-time songs aimed against the German invaders and translated into German, as well as some German classical poetry.

All this spurted out of me with menacing insistence on that awful day.

"Do you speak German?" I asked and, turning to him, I went on without even trying to slow up our walk in the face of the cinema, now less than a block away. "*Wunderbar!*" I went on. "Have you learnt it independently, or at a higher educational establishment? Oh, I understand, you learnt it when you were in Germany as an officer in the allied army. Not as a prisoner of war, I hope? No, no, that, of course, was a joke. Karl Marx once said that the best indication of a person's knowledge of a language is his understanding of humour in the given language, and a knowledge of foreign languages is a weapon in the struggle for life."

As I looked at Kostya I sensed that he understood almost nothing of all this. From time to time his face lit up with conjecture as he tried to catch at a word he knew, but this word would be followed by a whole host of unknown words which got him completely lost.

I felt victorious. We were now almost at the cinema. From behind the trees and bushes on the square we could hear the low murmur of a crowd, and we came across a number of people wanting to buy any spare tickets. When I saw the first of these I could hardly stop myself jumping for joy.

My beloved bit her lip. From the loud-speaker above the cinema entrance there flowed out the light melody of *Tales from the Vienna Woods*.

"Sunsets over the Rhine," I said, turning back to the Captain, "are just as beautiful as the sunrises in the Swiss Alps... These pheasants are from the woods on our family estate. *Probieren Sie, bitte!* My gamekeeper is a great eccentric..."

At this point I gestured to the top of one of the camphor-trees we happened to be passing. My companions raised their heads in surprise.

"*Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühn?*" I asked the Captain, as always, going too far and not knowing when to stop.

The Captain said nothing.

"Kostya, well why don't you answer him?" our beloved intervened in despair when I stopped for breath. She was ashamed for him.

"Why interrupt?" Kostya commented calmly. "If only I could talk like that in exams." In the autumn Kostya was to enter a military academy in Leningrad.

We approached the cinema. Kostya went round the crowd still hoping to find a ticket or two, but it was all in vain. I was overjoyed but, it seems, too early, and most importantly, too openly.

Half an hour later we were in the park by the dancing arena. They, as usual, went off to dance while her sister and I stayed on the bench.

In those days, as in all subsequent days, I danced badly. Dancing rhythms got stuck somewhere in my stomach, and they arrived in my legs only in the shape of vague, belated jerks. So her sister, naturally enough, was in no hurry to dance with me. We would just sit there side by side, either talking or, even better, saying nothing. Only rarely did anyone think of asking her to dance; rarely, because the patrons of the dancing arena took her to be my girl.

So we were sitting there that evening, suspecting nothing. But we sat out one dance, then another, and a third, and our other two still didn't return.

"Where have they got to?" I said, looking into her sister's eyes.

"How should I know?" she answered with a shrug of her shoulders, and she looked at me with her sleepy eyes half-hidden under their delicate eyelids.

"Let's take a walk round," I suggested, nodding towards the dancing arena.

"OK, we might as well," she said with another shrug of her shoulders, and stood up.

We walked around the bubbling circle of the arena and I tried to make out all the dancing couples; I saw that they weren't there. I felt a nauseating depression grip me.

"Maybe they've gone into the shooting gallery," I suggested uncertainly.

She shrugged her shoulders, and we went over to the shooting gallery.

It was empty. There was only the man in charge, leaning with his back against the counter, looking in a small mirror and smacking shot after shot into a target. As we entered he planted his fourth shot in the bull.

"Let's make a bet," he said, not turning round, and putting his fifth shot into the air-gun. "I can do it with one hand and without a gun-rest, do you take two and with a gun-rest?"

"No," I said, watching him put his fifth shot into the bull.

We crossed over to the cold drinks pavilion, but they weren't there either. I suddenly got the idea they might have returned to the bench while we had been looking for them, and they'd be waiting for us. I hurried her sister along and we went back to our usual bench, but they weren't there. I decided to wait for them a bit. But they didn't turn up. Then I suddenly felt a wave of suspicion, I thought maybe they were all conspiring against me. I started looking my companion in the eye, trying to discover there an expression of



secret mockery, but there seemed to be nothing of the sort showing, simply a clear, sleepy face with beautiful eyes under their heavy lids. I couldn't even work out whether she was worried about them disappearing.

"Maybe they're somewhere in there," I said, nodding towards the depths of the park.

She shrugged her shoulders silently, and we began to walk round the park, looking into each lonely corner, at every bench. We even went round behind the statue of Stalin, thinking maybe they had climbed up to the top step of the pedestal and were sitting comfortably leaning on the skirts of his granite greatcoat. But they weren't there either.

We found ourselves at last in the most solitary corner of the park, where we could just hear the dance music, filtered of its clinging banality by the intervening greenery. We approached the bench there under the branches of a box-tree, although we could see from a distance that there was no one sitting on it. We just had a sudden urge to approach this shaded bench, to make properly certain, maybe... So we went up to the bench and stood there. Next to the bench there was a huge bush of pampas grass. For no particular reason I lifted up its hanging mane and pushed it aside. I looked underneath, as though they could have suddenly fallen off the bench and rolled under the bush.

"Not here," I said, and let go of the strangely rustling bush.

I looked at my companion. She shrugged her shoulders. And suddenly I had an overall sense of this solitary corner of the park, of this softened music from afar, and of this fresh full-grown girl with her heavy eyelids and bright lips; the world swayed in front of my eyes, I put my hands on her shoulders, and at that very moment I felt the shadow of some great and sad thought passing over me and hiding itself away somewhere.

"Where on earth can they be?" I asked, trying to bring back the strange state I had been in just a moment before. But obviously she felt that something had changed inside me.

"How should I know?" she said, and shrugged her shoulders: this could have been taken as a half-hearted attempt to free herself.

I dropped my hands.

The thought that had come to me in that moment so struck me that I hardly said another word for the rest of the evening; somewhere around midnight I took my companion home and continued to think about it.

When I had put my hands on the girl's shoulders, looked so closely into her beautiful sleepy eyes under their heavy lids, and felt that I could kiss her, then I suddenly realised that at that moment my great, my one and only love had left its intended course and was rushing off almost painlessly into an unexpected side-stream. And then I felt and even saw, as though quite plainly, the multiplicity of life itself and, consequently, of my own life and my own love.

And at the same time there arose in me a feeling, like a sad presentiment, that life in its highest moments would show itself to me in its multiplicity and that I would never be able to take advantage of one of its many off-shoots, but would have to follow the allotted path... So that the multiplicity is no use to us, just give us the one, the unique highway. For the sake of this highway we are not averse to breaking our necks or even giving our souls a black eye, but variety's no good to us, we're bored by this very variety, and for its sake we wouldn't bat an eyelid or lift a finger.

Although I'm developing this thought sort of lightly now, it really came to me on that pleasant, yet fateful, evening.

I can't remember how they explained their disappearance, and I don't want to start making things up; obviously they did explain, and I believed them, because I wanted to believe. And anyway, we still met together from time to time. Sometimes I fell into despair, but a natural optimism and the memory of that unforgettable letter eventually gained the upper hand.

But how many bitter moments there were when it seemed that all was lost, that there had never been a letter, and that I had dreamt it all.

Thus one day, in my hearing, she was talking to her sister and recalling the days when we had been in class together, and she suddenly said:

"Do you remember what he was like then, but now..."

She said this with a sort of quiet regret. I turned cold with the insult of it, but I kept quiet. I mean, you don't start trying to show that you're better today than you were yesterday, and that tomorrow you'll be even better than you are today, although I really did want to show it. When I got home that evening I looked long and hopelessly in the mirror at my yellowed, malaria-dried face.

Nevertheless, the scales began to tip in my favour. With every meeting I started to notice with gratitude the hidden signs of her attention. The poor Captain was totally shaded out. For a whole week there were just the three of us, he had disappeared, obviously

feeling that he was beginning to make himself look silly. With considerations of the greatest tact I did not ask about him, and I even pretended not to notice my victory.

And at last the only, the unrepeatable evening when we were alone, just the two of us. I was exultant. To tell the truth, I had been sure that that evening would have to come sooner or later. It was the victory of well-honed theory over the Captain's straightforward practice; though he really was an excellent fellow.

But what was he to do? Since he hadn't been the one to receive that letter, he'd be better off not poking his nose in. Keep your nose out of it, dear Captain, don't throw your money around, don't joke with a person who, before setting off into that rough sea, had received a letter that was devilishly like a pilot's chart.

It was evening. We were standing by her garden gate. She was wearing a wonderful blue dress with little flashes of colour on it flowing over her supple figure. A pale light, turned green by the vine leaves around the summer-house, reached us from the windows of her house. And together with the light there was an indeterminate sound of talking and laughter. From time to time we also caught the faint scent of ripening grapes.

I was standing in front of her, and I could feel the first kiss ripening in the twilight. With an astronomical slowness and an equal inevitability my face moved closer to hers, showing white in the twilight. She was looking at me from under her brows with a beautiful, deep, searching and, I felt, a simply curious look.

I was terribly worked up not only with the expectation of the coming miracle, but also with worries about its scandalous consequences. For the life of me I couldn't tell whether she understood what was coming to fruition in those moments.

She just looked at me from under her brows, and I felt waves of courage and timidity ebbing and flowing within me.

"Your face keeps changing," she whispered in surprise.

"Does it?" I whispered in reply, although I myself felt how it was indeed changing, every second, but I thought this would not be noticeable to her.

I was flattered that she had noticed the strength of my agitation. I had time to realise that if she were overcome with shame and revulsion when I kissed her, then I could try to explain it by my state of irresponsibility.

And now so near was the light patch of her face. The terrible moment of entry into the warm cloud.

"Please, no," I heard her provoking whisper, and I plunged my lips into the shaking (perhaps with some childhood or antediluvian memory), milky scent of her cheek.

After a head-spinning eternity I felt the fragrant cloud of the first touch gradually disperse, and the feeling became drier and sweeter, perhaps too much so...

But then she slipped away, ran through the gate and disappeared in the darknes, the heels of her shoes making a dull sound on the garden path and then clattering up the porch steps. Suddenly she appeared on the well-lit porch, knocked on the door to be let in and quickly bent down (I saw a lock of hair fall over her eyes) to look through the letter-box.

I watched her, intoxicated by what had happened and at the same time surprised at the soberness of her movements: what letter could she now expect after the one she had already sent and, more importantly, after what had just happened? For a few moments she waited for the door to be opened, and I watched her and suddenly felt within me an unusual power, such that had I wanted her to turn round to look at me then she would indeed turn round.

For those few moments I looked at her triumphantly from afar, trying to impress her with my desire, certain that it would indeed reach her. But then the door opened, and she slipped inside without turning round.

In no way put out by this I walked away home along quiet suburban streets, small private houses on either side, each with its own little plot of land. As I passed each house I was met by a dog on the far side of the fence, and an angry barking would accompany me to the end of the fence, where the next dog was impatiently waiting for me and already joining in the barking. These dogs handed me on like a relay baton.

I paid no attention to them. I was filled with the confidence of a man, or rather, with that of an alchemist who has successfully carried out his first feat of magic after so many failures. It seemed to me that I was all-powerful. I stopped by a railing behind which there was a particularly loud and angry dog. Gasping for breath with every bark, it was simultaneously throwing up earth with its hind legs.

Suddenly I sat down on my haunches and stared through the railings at its eyes full of senseless hatred. Then I told it out loud that love and kindness were all-powerful, that if I wanted it to it would immediately stop barking and would slobber and yelp with delight because at that moment I loved even it, the silly, silly dog. Obviously the dog really

was silly, because my words didn't reach it, and it just went on howling at me.

The next day I went for a walk along the sea-shore, still under the influence of the previous evening, remembering its thrilling details and, most important, feeling myself taller by a head than before.

Our next meeting was to be the day after this. And although I had begged her to come and meet me the very next day after our evening together, she had held her ground saying she had too much to do at home; but then, as I walked along the shore I thought that having a rest from each other for a day would be no bad thing.

I recalled all the incalculable blessings of the previous evening. The day was sunny, but not too hot. Unexpectedly, I met Kostya. He was also out for a walk on his own. We said hello, and I shook his hand more firmly than usual, trying thus to let him know of my noble sympathy and my wish that he cope like a man with his failure. I felt that he too shook my hand more firmly than usual, and I realised that somehow he must have guessed what had happened and was now silently congratulating me on my well-won victory. I was delighted to see such nobility in him, and I shook his hand even more firmly. Presumably he had been to see her, I decided, and she had told him everything.

"Have you been to see her?" I asked.

"No," he said, "I've only just come back from field training, and I'm going away today."

"Where to?"

"To Leningrad," he said, and looked at me with curiosity. "Hasn't she told you?"

"She must have forgotten," I said. And I think I stood up to his gaze.

This information was like thunder on a clear day. It was probably only sheer will-power that stopped my blood from rushing to my face.

"She's seeing me off today," he added, rather too normally.

We went on strolling along the shore. I think he suggested to go to some cafe or other before parting, but I heard nothing and understood nothing, and I took the first convenient opportunity to leave him.

So that was the price of my victory! In reality I had only been filling a temporarily vacant post! I started thinking through, day by day, our meetings of that last week, and I realised that the increased warmth in our relations, the hidden signs of attention and, finally, the previous evening — that crowned it all — were explained by the fact that he was leaving.

I knew, of course, that he was due to go away to a military

academy, but I hadn't thought it would be so soon, not until the very end of August, and secondly, I had never once even dreamt of connecting my victory with such a mechanical elimination of my rival. It all seemed to me now to be so unbearably vile.

The following Saturday evening, while walking along Port Street, I caught sight of her and her sister among a crowd of their friends. Usually I would have gone up to her.

She was in the same blue dress with the flashes of colour, but now it seemed to be snake-like. We nodded to each other, but I didn't go up to her. We continued on our separate ways, I with my friends, she with hers.

She seemed to think I felt shy of her friends, and she and her sister lingered behind the rest. But still I didn't approach her. I saw with malicious enjoyment that signs of dismay, I thought perhaps even of panic, appeared on her face. Her sister, as though at long last waking up, gazed at me with respectful curiosity.

My friends, who by now knew all about it, looked at me with more friendly eyes, as they might look at a man who had given away to the poor the vain riches that had come his way, and who had returned to his own poor, but honest, friends.

At last her sister called me over. She herself was standing by the parapet along the sea-front. She was standing facing the sea. As I approached, she turned slightly.

"What's the matter?" she asked, and looked carefully into my eyes.

"Has Kostya gone?" I asked, expecting her to lose control of herself.

But for some reason she didn't lose control.

"Yes," she answered. "He asked to be remembered to you."

"Thank you," I muttered with theatrical dignity, and added: "But I don't need any dates filched from him."

This was a carefully prepared and, I thought, deadly phrase.

"So that's what you..." her lips whispered, as though she suddenly realised her irreparable error.

The next moment she had turned away; hanging her pitiable, pretty head she began to walk away, faster and faster, like all women when they try to run away from burgeoning tears.

I had a terrible urge to chase after her, but I held myself in check. The town now seemed empty and boring, and so I went home.

That same evening I went down with tonsillitis; and a week later, when I was better, the acuteness of breaking up was already softened and had receded.

One of my friends afterwards told me, by the way, that every time he fell in love he would also invariably fall ill. And there was a direct correlation between the strength of his passion and the degree of illness, which ranged widely from a fever to the flu.

But I never again saw the girl who had sent me that most beautiful letter. That same year her parents sold their house and moved away to another town.

Even while we were together I sometimes wondered whether she could have composed such a fiery missive herself. Perhaps, I thought, she had copied it from some ancient novel, just adding little bits of her own. This supposition was not an insult to me. I felt that she had given me a sign, an accurate hieroglyph of her state. But who had dreamt up the hieroglyph, after all, was not all that important.

But on the other hand, who knows, perhaps her feelings had been fired by an inspiration which was only sufficient for that letter, no more. Whatever the truth, it is now a mystery I do not intend to try and solve myself, and I am even less disposed to listen to any suggestions from others, whether these suggestions be either perspicacious, or simply flattering to the narrator.

*Translated by Graham Whittaker*

# Vasily Shukshin

## THE CLASSY DRIVER



That spring, when sowing time came round, a new lad, driver Pashka Kholmansky, arrived in Bystryanka. Lean, wiry, light on his feet, bold grey eyes, with a yellowish tinge in them, thin, straight nose, a few small-pox scars and steeply arched brows. Dangerous or handsome, it was hard to say. He reminded you of some kind of bird.

Pashka had been born in a family of Old Believers. He came from one of the villages high up the River Katun in the Altai Mountains, but he had adopted none of the staid, old-fashioned ways of his forefathers.

What brought him to Bystryanka was this.

Yermolai Prokhorov, chairman of the local collective farm, was halfway home from town in the farm's landrover when one of the back-springs broke. Prokhorov, having delivered a satisfying blast of invectives at the driver, set about thumbing a lift on a passing lorry. Two went by without stopping, but the third pulled up and the driver opened his door.

"Where're you going?"

"Bystryanka."

"What about Salton? Is that anywhere near it?"

"Just a bit nearer. Why?"

"I'll take you as far as Salton. You can show me the way."

They drove on together.

The driver sat leaning back in his seat, right hand on the wheel, left elbow resting on the cab door. His eyes were fixed on the road ahead, a thoughtful pucker at the corners.



The lorry belted along, miraculously avoiding the potholes. They passed an oncoming lorry so close that the chairman gasped. He glanced sideways at the driver. The lad was sitting there as if nothing had happened, the same thoughtful pucker at the corner of his eye.

"Ever had an accident?"

"Eh?... Not to worry. Keep your hair on, dad. What's the main thing in the air force?" The driver's face broke into a wide, friendly grin.

"The main thing in the air force, I should think, would be not to show off."

"No, that's not it." The lad let go of the wheel altogether and felt in his pocket for cigarettes. The idea of his passenger being scared seemed to amuse him.

Prokhorov gritted his teeth and turned away.

At that moment the lorry was flung into the air. Prokhorov grabbed instinctively for the door—and looked murder at the driver.

"Heh, you! Air force!"

The lad smiled again.

"I appreciate speed," he confessed.

Prokhorov studied the lad's eyes for a moment; there was something about him he liked.

"What's taking you to Salton?"

"My job."

"What's that — the sowing?"

"Yes, got to help the farm boys sometimes."

The crafty Prokhorov kept quiet for a while, and lit himself a cigarette. He had decided to win the lad over to work on the farm of which he was chairman.

"Are you going to work in Salton itself or somewhere in the district?"

"Somewhere outside. Village of Listvyanka. Nice country you have round here."

"What's your name?"

"Mine? Pashka. Pavel Yegorych Kholmansky."

"We're namesakes then. My father's name was Yegor too. Why don't you come and work for us, Yegorych?"

"How do you mean?"

"I know the chairman at the farm where you're going. I'll make it all right with him. I'm a chairman too. Listvyanka's a dump,

I can tell you. Not a patch on our place."

"I don't quite get it. My instructions say —"

"What difference does it make to you?! I can give you the same slip of paper to say you did your job on the sowing. It'll all be on the level. I'll settle it with that chairman. He owes us a favour anyway. What about it?"

"Do you have a club?" Pashka asked.

"A club? Of course!"

"Snapshot."

"What?"

"It's a deal, I say. Superchromatic."

Prokhorov chuckled ingratiatingly.

"You're a joker, I see. (An extra driver with a truck thrown in just at sowing time — that was a snapshot all right! And superchromatic too!) You're a real joker, Yegorych."

"I do my best. So you've got a bit of a club there, have you?"

"Aye, that we have, Pavel. Fine club — used to be a church!"

"We'll be able to say our prayers then," Pashka responded.

They both laughed.

That was how Pashka came to be in Bystryanka.

Pashka lived at Prokhorov's. He quickly made friends with the mistress of the house, Prokhorov's wife.

He seemed to enjoy talking to her of an evening.

"A wife must have feeling!" Pashka declared one evening, tucking into a rich broth of goose and noodles.

"That's right, Yegorych," Prokhorov played up to him, bending double to pull off a tight boot. "What sort of wife would she be if she didn't have feeling, eh!"

"Suppose I come home," Pashka went on. "If I'm all whacked out and dirty, the first thing I've got to see is my wife with plenty of go in her. 'Hullo there, Marusya!' I says, for example. And she comes back at me cheerful like, 'Hullo there, Pavel dear! Are you tired?'"

"But suppose she's tired herself, the poor thing, after her day's work? Where's she to get her cheerfulness from?" the mistress of the house remarked.

"Doesn't matter. If she's sour and down in the mouth, I'll say to her, 'Superchromatic.' And I'll feel attracted to others. Won't I, Yegorych?"

"That's for sure!" Prokhorov yessed him.

His wife pretended to be angry and said that all men were skirt-chasers.

Pashka put in an appearance at the club the day after his arrival. Nonchalantly cheerful, a striking figure in his dark-red shirt unbuttoned at the neck, chrome-leather top boots, and a new military-style cap with an explosive brown forelock bursting from the peak.

"What's the local population like — not so bad?" he asked one of the lads casually and took a cool look round at the dancing couples. He wanted to know what impression he had made on the "local population".

"Not so bad," the lad replied.

"And what are you so sour about, for example?"

"And who are you to be questioning me?" the lad retorted.

Pashka grinned peaceably.

"I'm your new public prosecutor. I'm here to put this place in order."

"Mind you don't get yourself put in order."

"Never mind," Pashka winked at him, and continued to survey the lads and girls in the hall.

They surveyed him back.

Pashka liked such situations. Anything strange, unfamiliar, hostile put him on his mettle. Most of all, of course, he was interested in the girls.

The dance ended and the couples returned to their seats.

"Who's that lass?" Pashka asked the fellow he had already spoken to. The girl he had noticed was Nastasya Platonova, one of the local beauties.

But the fellow walked away without answering.

The band struck up a waltz.

Pashka strode straight across the hall to Nastasya, made a slight bow and said loudly: "May I have this waltz?"

Everyone was surprised at Pashka's exquisite manners; they began to take a cheerful and unconcealed interest in him.

Nastasya rose calmly and rested a weighty hand on Pashka's lean shoulder; Pashka stared tenderly into her eyes.

They waltzed.

Nastasya was rather heavy in action, languid. Pashka, on the other hand, gave such a dazzling display of steps that some people actually stopped dancing to watch him. But he finally flabbergast-

ed the public when he moved away a little from Nastasya and, without letting go of her hand, did some complicated "feathering" alongside her. Everyone gasped... Pashka, however, merely looked over the heads of the "local population", as much as to say, "That's nothing. I'll show you what I can do one day, when I'm in the mood. I used to be quite a dancer."

Nastasya, with a high flush in her cheeks, kept up her slow, smooth rhythm.

"You do like showing off, don't you?" she said gaily, looking into Pashka's eyes.

Pashka didn't turn a hair.

"Where are you from?"

"Moscow," Pashka replied casually.

"Are they all like that there?"

"Like what?"

"Such show-offs."

"Your ignorance amazes me," Pashka said, thrusting a meaningful tender glance into the well-depths of Nastasya's dark, enigmatic eyes.

Nastasya laughed softly.

Pashka was serious.

"I like you," he said. "You're the ideal I've always looked for."

Nastasya met Pashka's glance point-blank. "Fast worker, aren't you?"

"I'm dead serious!"

"So what?"

"I'll see you home tonight. Unless you've got some other boy-friend to look after you. Is it a deal?"

Nastasya smiled and shook her head. This Pashka ignored. The waltz ended.

Pashka escorted the girl back to her seat, made another exquisite bow and went out for a smoke with the other lads in the lobby.

He was met by hostile glances. Pashka knew it was always like that.

"Any place around here where you can get a quick drink?" he asked, going up to a group of smokers.

The lads eyed Pashka mockingly. No one answered.

"What's up? Lost your tongues?"

"Don't you think you've been showing a bit too much initiative lately?" the lad Pashka had spoken to before the dance asked him.

"No, I don't."

"Well, I do."

"Cross your heart, if you do."

The lad's eyes narrowed unpleasantly.

"Come outside for a minute and we'll talk it over."

Pashka shook his head.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Right now you'd make a cripple of me, and all for nothing... We'll talk it over later. What are you all looking so mean about anyway? I haven't trod on anyone's corns, have I?"

The lads had not expected that. Pashka's frankness appealed to them. Gradually they got talking.

While they were talking, the band struck up a tango and someone else invited Nastasya to dance. Pashka stamped furiously on the butt of his cigarette... Nastasya, they told him, was going steady with an engineer from Moscow, whom it looked as if she would marry. Pashka watched Nastasya closely and seemed not to be listening. Then he tilted his cap on to the back of his head and frowned.

"We'll see who snapshots who," he said and replaced his cap. "Where is he?"

"Who?"

"This engineer fellow."

"He's not here tonight."

"I fix intellectuals with my left."

The tango ended.

Pashka went over to Nastasya.

"You didn't answer my question."

"What question?"

"Am I seeing you home tonight?"

"I'll be all right alone, thank you."

Pashka sat down beside her. His round, cat-like eyes were serious again.

"Let's talk it over, as between gentlemen —"

"Oh, my goodness!" Nastasya got up with a sigh and walked away to the other end of the hall.

Pashka watched her. He heard the sympathetic chuckles around him and felt no shame. But he was aware of a pain in the pit of his stomach, a hot, stabbing pain. He, too, rose and left the club.

The following evening Pashka dressed himself up even more stylishly than before. He begged an embroidered shirt off Prokhorov, girdled it with a blue silk sash with tassels, put on his dark-blue cord breeches and a worsted jacket and turned up at the local library (Nastasya was the librarian, as he had discovered through timely inquiry).

"Good evening!" he said confidently, as he entered the roomy cottage that served the village both as library and reading-room.

Nastasya was alone, except for a young man sitting at a table and looking through an illustrated magazine.

Nastasya returned Pashka's greeting and smiled at him as if he were an old acquaintance.

Pashka went up to her desk and calmly began examining the books there, paying no attention to the girl at all. He had guessed that the young man reading the magazine was her fiancé.

"Would you like something to read?" Nastasya asked, rather surprised that Pashka hadn't recognised her.

"Yes, what I need is..."

"What do you need?" Nastasya involuntarily adopted his tone.

"Marx's *Capital*. I haven't quite finished the last chapter."

The young man put his magazine aside and looked at Pashka.

Nastasya was about to laugh, but thought better of it at the sight of Pashka's stern face.

"What's your second name?"

"Kholmansky. Year of birth 1935. Driver-mechanic, 2nd class."

While Nastasya was writing all this down, Pashka observed her unobtrusively from the corner of his eye. Then he looked round. The engineer was observing him. Their eyes met. Pashka lost his nerve for a moment and winked.

"Doing crosswords, are we?"

At first the engineer was stumped for a reply.

"Hum... You prefer something deeper, I see."

"By the way, Genna, he's from Moscow too," Nastasya put in.

"Are you really?!" Genna was sincerely delighted. "How long since you left? Tell us the news."

Pashka took longer than was necessary signing his name on the library card, and made no reply.

"Thanks," he said to Nastasya, carried the heavy tome over to the table, plonked it down and held out his hand to Genna. "Pavel Yegorych."

"Genna. Glad to meet you."

"So you want to know about Moscow?" Pashka resumed, pulling over a few magazines. "Bustling along as usual is Moscow. Bustling along..." And without giving the engineer a chance to recover, he rattled on, "I like the funnies, don't you? Particularly the ones about alcoholics — the pictures they draw of them!"

"Yes, some of the cartoons are funny. How long is it since you were in Moscow?"

"In Moscow..." Pashka turned over a page. "Never been there in my life. The girl must have mixed me up with someone else."

"But you told me so yourself in the club last night!" Nastasya protested.

Pashka glanced at her.

"Doesn't ring a bell."

Nastasya looked at Genna, Genna at Pashka.

Pashka was studying the cartoons.

"That's queer," Nastasya said. "I must have dreamed it."

"Can happen," Pashka assented, continuing his scrutiny of the magazine. "Look at this one — the old humbug," he said, handing Genna the magazine. "What a sight, eh!"

Genna smiled.

"Are you here to help us with the sowing?"

"That's it." Pashka glanced round at Nastasya. She was eyeing him with interest. Pashka noted the fact. "What about a game of draughts?" he suggested to the engineer.

"Draughts? Why not chess?"

"Chess is a drag," said Pashka (he couldn't play chess). "You have to think too much. But draughts — slap, bang and there you are!"

"All right, draughts it is," Genna agreed, and looked at Nastasya.

Nastasya came out from behind the desk and sat down with them.

"Do we huff?" Pashka asked.

"What's that?"

"You give up a man for not taking when you could have done," Nastasya explained.

"Uh-huh... All right. Let's huff."

Pashka quickly arranged the men on the board, picked up two and held them behind his back.

"Which hand?"

"Left."

"No go for you." Pashka had the first move.

"Well, let's start off like this," he said, settling himself comfortably on his chair; his face wore a sly, satisfied expression. "No smoking in here, of course?" he asked Nastasya.

"No, of course not."

"Right-y-ho, then!" Pashka made his second move. "Now we'll do the superchromatic, as the French say."

The engineer was a poor player. Anyone could see that. Nastasya began giving him advice. To this he objected.

"Just a minute! This is all wrong... Why do you keep prompting me?"

"Because you keep making the wrong moves!"

"What if I do? I'm the one who's playing."

"You should learn how."

Pashka was smiling. His moves were swift and sure.

"That one over there... The far one, Genna." Again Nastasya could not resist prompting.

"No, I can't go on like this!" Genna became indignant. "I was just going to move that one and now I won't — on principle."

"Why get all het-up about it? Silly!"

"Of course, I'm het-up."

"Worry's bad for the nervous system," Pashka cut in, and shot a wink at Nastasya. She blushed.

"Now you're going to lose — on principle."

"No, why should he? He's still got a good chance to snapshot me," Pashka said condescendingly. "That gives me a king, by the way. Your move."

"Now you *have* lost," Nastasya said disappointedly.

"Mind your own business!" Genna lost his temper. "This is impossible. Keep away!"

"And you call yourself an engineer." Nastasya got up and went back to her desk.

"That's not very clever. What has my being an engineer to do with it?"

"*I'm afraid he'll fall for me,*" Nastasya sang, as if to herself, and walked away among the shelves.

"The female sex," Pashka said for some reason.

The engineer swept the pieces together on the board and said hoarsely, "I've lost."

"Let's go and have a smoke," Pashka suggested.

"Let's."



Lighting up in the corridor, the engineer confided, "I can't understand that way she has with her. She must interfere in everything."

"Not to worry," Pashka said vaguely. "Been here long?"

"What?"

"Have you been living here long?"

"Over a month now."

"Want to get married?"

The engineer stared at Pashka.

"Marry her? Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Not to worry. She's a nice girl. Does she love you?"

The engineer was quite taken aback.

"Love me?.. Well, I think so."

They both fell silent. Pashka smoked and studied the tip of his cigarette. The engineer coughed and asked, "Do you really read *Capital*?"

"No fear." Pashka stuck the cigarette casually into the corner of his mouth, drew his brows together, tucked his hands under his sash and deftly straightened his shirt. "How about going to the flickers?"

"What's on tonight?"

"It's a comedy, they say."

"We could do."

"Only — you'd better invite her." Pashka nodded towards the library door and pulled a sympathetic face.

"Yes, of course!" the engineer responded, also seriously. "I'll go in and — speak to her."

"Go on then."

The engineer withdrew and Pashka went out on to the steps, leaned on the rail and surveyed the street.

...At the cinema the three sat together, Nastasya in the middle.

As soon as the lights went out Pashka moved closer and took her hand. She silently withdrew it and moved away. Pashka watched the screen as if nothing had happened. After about ten minutes he again groped cautiously for her hand. Nastasya suddenly bent over to him and whispered very quietly in his ear, "If you don't stop pawing me, I'll make a scene in front of everybody."

Pashka took his hand away at once.

He sat still for another five minutes, then leaned over to Nastasya and said also in a whisper, "My heart is bursting like a splinter grenade."

Nastasya laughed very quietly. Pashka again felt for her hand. Nastasya turned to Genna.

"Let me sit in your place."

"His head's in your way, is it? Hi, comrade, take your head away!" Pashka commanded.

The comrade sitting in front "took away" his head.

"All right now?"

"All right," Nastasya replied.

The audience was noisy and kept breaking into roars of laughter.

Pashka bent over double, lighted a cigarette and hurriedly gulped down the aromatic smoke. Blue clouds of it curled up into the light rays from the projector. Nastasya nudged him in the ribs.

"What are you doing?"

Pashka put out his cigarette. A few moments later he found Nastasya's hand, squeezed it hard, released it and, bending low, made for the exit.

As he passed Genna he said, "The tigers can watch this one."

Out in the street Pashka loosened his collar and had a smoke. He walked slowly home.

At home he lay down on the bed without undressing.

"What are you so sad about?" Prokhorov asked.

"Nothing much..." Pashka said. He lay still for a few minutes, then asked suddenly, "I wonder if they still kidnap women?"

"How do you mean?" Prokhorov asked.

"Like they did in the old days. They used to, didn't they?"

"A-ah. Blowed if I know. Why kidnap 'em? They're willing enough, I reckon, without any kidnapping."

"That's so, of course. I was just thinking," Pashka agreed. After another pause he said, "And, of course, the law lays down no penalty for it?"

"Shouldn't think so. I don't really know."

Pashka rose from the bed and paced the room. He was thinking hard about something.

"*You're eighteen only once in life,*" he suddenly began to sing. "All right, Yegorych. Here's your shirt. T'ank you," he added in English.

"What's all this?"

"Nothing." Pashka pulled off Prokhorov's embroidered shirt and put on his own... He stood for a while in the middle of the room, still thinking. "Snapshot, Yegorych!"

"Don't tell me you want to kidnap some girl or other?" Prokhorov asked.

Pashka laughed but said nothing and went out into the street.

It was a damp, dark night. It had been raining heavily and everything was dripping. The village dogs were barking. Somewhere an engine was chugging noisily.

Pashka went to the depot where he kept his lorry.

In the garage yard a voice challenged him.

"Friend," Pashka responded.

"What friend?"

"Kholmansky."

The old watchman emerged into the circle of light. He was wearing a long sheepskin and had a gun over his shoulder.

"Got to go somewhere?"

"That's right."

"Can you spare a smoke?"

"I can."

They lighted up.

"There's going to be more rain, I reckon," the old man said with a yawn. "Makes you right sleepy, that it does."

"Go to sleep then," Pavel advised.

"Not allowed. I dozed off just now, and in comes that..."

Pashka interrupted the talkative old fellow.

"All right, Dad. I'm in a hurry."

"Off with you then!" the old man yawned again.

Pashka started up his lorry and drove out of the yard.

He knew where Nastasya lived. Down by the river on the other side of the bluff.

That afternoon he had been talking to Prokhorov and the chairman had pointed out the house. Pashka had remembered that the windows of the best room looked out on to the garden.

Now only one question worried him. Did the Platonovs have a dog or not?

There was no one about in the streets. Even the courting couples had taken refuge indoors. Pashka drove slowly, for fear of getting stuck somewhere.

Near Nastasya's house, he coasted to a halt, climbed out of the cab and left the engine running.

"Now for it," he said softly and rubbed his chest with the palm of his hand; he was very nervous.

There was no light on in the house. When his eyes grew accustomed

to the darkness, Pashka was able to make out through the bare branches the faintly glimmering windowpanes of the front room. His heart began to thump violently.

No dog. They mustn't have a dog.

He coughed and shook the fence cautiously — not a sound from the yard. All was quiet. He could hear raindrops falling from the roof.

Well, Pashka, either a bullet through your head or...

He swung himself quietly over the low fence and made for the windows. There was no sound but the muffled murmur of his faithful steed behind him, the rustle of his own footsteps and the loud dripping. The spring sap was rising everywhere. The air was damp as in a cellar.

As Pashka crept through the garden, he kept singing in his mind the song about being eighteen, just that one line: "*You're eighteen only once in life.*" He had been singing it all day, ever since morning.

When he was just by the windows a twig snapped loudly under his foot. He froze to the spot. Silence. Falling raindrops. Pashka took the last two steps and positioned himself between the front windows. He paused to recover his breath.

A new question arose. Would she be alone sleeping in the best room? He pulled out a torch, switched it on and shone it through a window. The yellow blob of light crept over the walls picking out various objects in the darkness: a big tiled stove, a door, a bed... The blob quivered and stopped. In the bed someone had stirred. A head was raised—it was Nastasya. She was not frightened. She sprang out of bed lightly and came to the window in her night dress. Pashka switched off the torch.

Nastasya threw back the latches and opened the window.

Warm sleepy air gushed out of the room.

"What is it?" she asked softly. The estrangement in her voice put Pashka on his guard.

Had she recognised him? For the time being he wanted to be taken for someone else. He said nothing.

Nastasya stepped back from the window. Pashka switched on the torch. Nastasya went to the door of the room, closed it firmly and returned to the window. Pashka switched the torch off.

She hadn't recognised him. Otherwise she wouldn't be walking about like this in only her night dress.

Nastasya leaned out of the window. She was so close Pashka could smell her hair. A hot mist rose before his eyes. He pushed her aside and climbed in through the window.

"So it dawned on you at last?" Nastasya said. There was a warmer note in her voice.

It's dawned on me all right, Pashka thought. Now there'll be a rumpus.

"Hadn't you better wipe your feet?" Nastasya said, when Pashka was through the window and standing beside her.

Pashka still said nothing. He took her in his arms, all warm and soft—and squeezed her so hard that one of the ties on her nightdress broke.

"Oh!" Nastasya panted for breath. "What are you doing, you devil?"

Pashka started kissing her. But then something came over Nastasya. She suddenly tore herself free, sprang away and ran her hand wildly over the wall in search of the light switch.

It's all up, Pashka told himself, preparing for the worst. Now she would start screaming. Her father would come running in and "snapshot" him. As a precaution he stepped back to the window.

The light flashed on... Nastasya was so dumbfounded at first that she forgot she was standing almost naked in front of a stranger.

Pashka smiled at her tenderly.

"Frightened?"

Nastasya snatched her skirt from a chair and began to pull it on. Then she came up to Pashka... Before he had time to think, he felt a stinging slap on his left cheek. Then another, on his right.

For a time they stood facing each other, just staring. Anger had flooded Nastasya's cheeks with colour. She was astoundingly beautiful at that moment.

That engineer's a lucky man, Pashka could not help thinking.

"Get out of here at once!" Nastasya said quietly.

Pashka realised she was not going to scream—she was not that kind.

"Let's talk this over, as between gentlemen," he said. He lit a cigarette. "I could leave, of course, but that would be flat. Feeble." He tossed the match out of the window and pondered this idea, rather hurriedly because he was afraid Nastasya would take hold of some heavy object and repeat her command. Apprehension set him pacing the room, from window to table and back. "I'm in love. That's a fact, not sales talk. And there's one thing I don't follow. What's this engineer got that I haven't? I could easily become a Hero of Socialist Labour, if you like. You've only got to say the word. So why raise the roof about it? Pack your things and off we go. We'll live together in town." Pashka broke off and looked at Nastasya seriously, unblinkingly.

He loved her, loved her as he had never loved anyone in his life. She realised that.

"How can you be so stupid?" she said sadly and quite simply. "Don't you see what nonsense it is?" She sat down on a chair. "Doing a thing like this, and then arguing about it. *He loves me!*" She blinked in a strange way and turned her head aside. Pashka realised she was crying. "You're in love. Doesn't it occur to you that I could be in love too?" She faced him with tears in her eyes.

Now she was really beautiful, extraordinarily so. And at this very moment Pashka realised that she would never be his. It was always like that with him. As soon as anything became deep or serious, it was not for him.

"Why are you crying?"

"Because you only think of yourselves... You're all so selfish. *He loves me!*" She wiped her tears. "If you love me, you might at least show me some respect. This isn't the way to..."

"What have I done? Climbed in through the window—who cares about that! It's happening all the time."

"It's not that. You're all such fools, that's what it is. He's a fool too—now he's mad with jealousy just because of you. He says he'll go away."

"Go away? Where?" Pashka realised who this particular fool was.

"Where? You'd better ask him!"

Pashka frowned.

"You don't mean it?"

Nastasya again wiped away her tears with the palm of her hand and said nothing.

Pashka's heart ached with pity for her.

"Get ready!" he commanded.

Nastasya looked up at him in surprise.

"We'll drive over to his place, I'll teach one of these Moscow cats what human love means."

"We're not going anywhere... Stop showing off."

"Now, look here, Beautiful!" Pashka drew himself up. "I let you slap my face, didn't I? But I'm not going to stand for this stupid talk. What do you mean — stop showing off?"

"Where can you take me at this time of night?"

"Who cares what time it is! Get dressed. Here's your blouse!"

Pashka snatched a blouse from the chair and tossed it to Nastasya. She caught it and rose hesitantly. Again Pashka started pacing the room.

"What made him jealous?" he asked, not without a touch of complacency.

"We danced together — someone told him about that. And we were whispering in the cinema. He's such an utter fool."

"Why couldn't you explain to him?"

"Why should I! And I'm not going anywhere."

Pashka halted.

"I'll count up to three. One, two... Then I start kissing you!"

"Just you try! What will you tell him?"

"I know what to say!"

"Then why should I go with you?"

"You must."

"But why?"

"I don't know where he lives. And you've got to go anyway — period."

Nastasya put on her blouse, then her shoes.

"Go on then. I'll follow you. Suppose someone were to see us now..."

Pashka climbed out into the garden and helped Nastasya out. They walked out to the road.

The truck was grumbling quietly at its master.

"Get in, Miss Tearful. Fine job this, carting you people around at night."

Pashka was beginning to enjoy his new and unexpected role.

Nastasya climbed into the cabin.

"You were going to drive off with me? In this?"

"Some hopes! I'd be old and grey before we got started."

"Well, Pavel, you are..."

"What?" he asked sternly.

"Never mind."

"That's better." Pashka yanked the truck noisily into gear and drove off.

...The engineer was not asleep when Pashka tapped on his window.

"Who's there?"

"Me."

"Who's that?"

"Pashka. Pavel Yegorych."

The engineer opened the door and let Pashka in. He stared at him in unconcealed astonishment.

Pashka nodded at the table littered with papers.

"Pouring your heart out in melancholy verse, are you?"

"I don't understand. What is..."

"You'll understand in a minute." Pashka sat down at the table and elbowed the papers aside. "Do you love Nastasya?"

"Now look here!" The engineer grew red in the face.

"Yes, you do. Well, go and fetch her then — she's in the truck."

"Where? What truck?"

"Outside in the street. You needn't have been jealous of me. I never have any luck with the good kind."

The engineer left the room quickly. As for Pashka, Pavel Yegorych, he let his head drop on the table and closed his eyes. Suddenly he felt tired. That song that had been bothering him all day had come back again. "*You're eighteen only once in life...*" He was aware of a nasty pain in the chest.

The engineer returned with Nastasya.

Pashka stood up... For a time he looked at them as if he was about to make a farewell speech.

"That's all?" he asked.

"That's all," said the engineer.

Nastasya smiled.

"Right then," Pashka said crossly. "All the best." He walked to the door.

"Where are you off to? Wait a minute!" the engineer protested.

Pashka went out without a backward glance.

Pashka left the village and headed for Salton. He had slipped a note under Prokhorov's door, giving the address of the transport depot to which a receipt for Pashka's three days' work should be sent. Realising how aggrieved the chairman would be, Pashka had added a postscript: "Forgive me, darling, but I couldn't help it."

Pashka felt sad. He smoked cigarette after cigarette.

It began to drizzle.

At Igrinevo, the last village before Salton, two figures loomed up on the road ahead. They waved. Pashka stopped.

A young officer and a girl ran up.

"Would you give us a lift as far as Salton, please!" The officer seemed very glad about something.

"Get in!"

The girl climbed into the cab and began fidgeting and brushing herself down. The lieutenant clambered into the back of the lorry. They started shouting to each other and laughing.

Pashka took a sidelong glance at the girl — very pretty, white teeth, rose-bud lips, as pretty as they make them! But a long way behind Nastasya.



"Where're you off to at this time of night?" he asked.

"Visiting," the girl responded readily. And she poked her head out of the cabin to speak to her boy-friend again. "Sasha? Sash!.. How're you getting on up there?"

"Tip-top!" the lieutenant shouted from the back.

"Isn't the day long enough?" Pashka questioned the girl again.

"What?" she glanced at him, then turned back to the window. "Sasha? Sash!.."

"Everyone's head over heels in love," Pashka grumbled. "Must be nuts, all of them." He remembered Nastasya again. Only a little while ago she had been sitting here beside him — but not his. And this one was not his either.

"Sasha! Sash!"

"Sasha? Sash!" Pashka muttered derisively to himself. "Your Sasha's walking on air as it is. He'd run ahead of this truck if you'd let him."

"I imagine what they'll say, when they see us!" Sasha shouted from the back of the lorry.

The girl fairly shook with laughter.

People aren't quite right in the head at this time of year, Pashka thought resentfully to himself.

The rain came on harder.

"Sash! How are you up there?!"

"A-okay! A-okay on board!"

"Tell him there's a tarpaulin under the spare tyre. He can cover himself with it," Pashka suggested.

The girl nearly fell out of the cab.

"Sasha! Sash!.. There's a tarpaulin under the spare tyre! Cover yourself with it!"

"All right! Thanks!"

"You're welcome," Pashka said. He lit another cigarette and fixed his eyes thoughtfully on the road ahead.

*Translated by Robert Daglish*

# Victor Likhonosov

## MOMENTS THAT MATTER



### I

Towards evening mother sent Lipa round to Sharonikha who lived next door. July was almost over, the peace of late afternoon lingered outside, in the distance buckets rattled and water splashed at the pump, beyond the village the sun sank into the bushes. Here and there in the backyards cows were being milked, one could hear the soft rasping sound of spurts of milk against the sides of the pail and by Sharonikha's gate her Katka mooed plaintively asking to be let in, her mistress, though, was on the razzle: songs, the clinking of glasses and the cheerful voice of Sharonikha herself carried into the street outside.

Taking the gate off the hook, Lipa let the cow in and tied her up to the fence.

"Don't bother about her! Come along in!" the mistress of the house called, running out onto the front steps.

"I've only popped round for a second, Auntie Marusya," Lipa said in a hurry.

"Why dither about on the doorstep then?"

"I've things to do."

"Who hasn't, dearie! I've the cow to milk and all. We'll be at death's door and still have our hands full. Come along in with you," Sharonikha pulled at Lipa. "Life is long, but there's no time to make merry."

"Lyoshka's waiting for me," Lipa lied.

"He'll wait! There are plenty of other people about apart from your Lyoshka, you know. At your age I tried them all out..." Giggling, she gave a drunken smile. "Come on, stop dithering, there's an actor in there, wants to meet you."

Leading Lipa inside, Sharonikha shouted:

"Here comes the bride!"

"That's enough, Auntie Marusya, once you get started there's no stopping you," Lipa mumbled, sitting herself down next to a lad in a bright yellow shirt.

"Oleg," Sharonikha said, turning to him, "what's wrong with her for a bride then?"

"I'm a timid sort of bloke, Auntie Marusya, I wouldn't stand a chance."

"You, timid? Go on with you!"

"What about the bride-to-be then, is she willing?" Oleg asked, eyeing Lipa boldly.

Unabashed, Lipa briefly returned his gaze. She'd long been aware of her beauty, had got used to it and never gave it much thought.

If I go on looking at her long enough, Oleg thought, she'll burst out laughing.

And this is more or less what happened, only Lipa managed to keep a grip on herself and to restrain her laughter.

"That remains to be seen," she eventually answered. "There is no trusting an actor."

Grinning and casting a sidelong glance at Oleg, Lipa turned away whispering something to her girlfriends who laughed.

"That's that, then," Sharonikha said, rounding off the introduction. "What the merry hell, let's drink to it. I've still the cow to milk and all."

Lipa was given a glassful of red wine.

"Here goes," said Oleg leaning across the table and clinking glasses with her. Not bothering to look at him, Lipa went on chatting to her friends. Then she took up her glass and drained it: if one was going to drink one might as well do the job properly!

"What's got into you, girls?" Sharonikha egged them on. "A pox on you, take what's going! Stop sitting mulling things over like a lot of old women! We're on the razzle, we are! Dunka was the only one of us who thought a lot and she spent eighty years on the shelf."

"She had second thoughts later on then?" someone asked and there was a roar of laughter.

Only when he took up a guitar and began to sing a tune she didn't know, did she begin to pay attention to his voice, quietly, simply conveying to her another person's life, and to the singer himself and she thought he looked exactly as he'd done in his last film. Yesterday evening at the club he told a lot of funny stories about life on a film set

and the girls had lost their hearts to him, writing him notes which had been handed up to the front of the hall.

How stupid they are, Lipa thought. OK, so he's an actor, good-looking, he can sing and he's famous. So what? Does that mean we have to run after him? Not likely! My Lyoshka's a better artist than he is any day. Get him tipsy and oh my!

"Sing us the song you played yesterday at the club," her friends pleaded.

"I'm not really a singer, you know."

"Stop shamming!" Lipa said sharply. "You can't fool us!"

They drank again and the ice was broken: everyone livened up and joined in the singing. Oleg accompanied them. "Play us one of the old tunes," Sharonikha asked him, but the girls weren't having any and Sharonikha concluded they had all taken a shine to him.

"How's my little son-in-law?" she asked, cuddling up to him. "No offence meant! My bark's worse than my bite, you know."

"Forget it!" said Oleg, leaning back. "Where else would I find a mother-in-law the likes of you?"

"Drink up, then. Right to the very last drop."

"I'm too far gone as it is."

"You in your last month?"

"There you go again, Auntie Marusya," Lipa said reproachfully.

"Bashful, are we? You weren't born yesterday!"

Lipa's mother came running in. "Dead loss sending you for anything!" she remarked tartly. And shaking her head she went out having told her daughter not to linger and to bolt the gate when she came home.

Oleg and Sharonikha danced to the accompaniment of clapping and humorous ditties. Her heavy body lunging and swinging, Sharonikha stamped her feet rapidly. She sang so loudly and with such verve and, what's more, she knew so many ditties, that Lipa realized for the first time why she was the life and soul of all merry-making in the village.

"Hey ho, a pox on you!" Sharonikha sang, really letting herself go. "Oh to be seventeen, with bell-like breasts!"

And they were off.

The glasses jumped up and down on the tables, the tables were pushed back to the wall, the windows flung open and someone knocked against the pail which the mistress of the house had been going to take to milk her cow.

Warming up, giving way more and more to the noise and dancing,

Lipa watched the old woman and young man tripping the light fantastic. Her head muzzy, she wanted to jump up and drum away on the floor with her heels, in competition with Oleg, who wasn't a bit stuck up, though, of course, he wasn't a patch on Lyoshka, he's an actor, don't forget, silly, he's an actor, Lyoshka's worth ten of him, there is no beating Lyoshka once he gets on the floor when he's with his pals, when he's tipsy, it's too bad he's not here or we'd really show them! She should be going, but something kept her there, she couldn't move, her head was whirring and the lad's feet were beating faster and faster on the floor. It was hardly likely Lyoshka had got back from the fields, and if he had, he'd wait, he wouldn't come to any harm. She wouldn't stay long, she'd watch just a wee bit more and then she'd go out on to the front steps, cool off and slip away unnoticed.

Once outside, she seized hold of the stanchion to steady herself and heard the following words hurtling out of the room:

*Eh now, I stamp with one foot,  
Then I stamp with the other!..*

What a beautiful night it was on the steps and on the far side of the vegetable patch, and over there by the forest, by the vibrant, dark fields. What did it all mean?

Her head spun, she no longer wanted to go home, the needle-sharp stars shone overhead, the silence made her skin tingle, made her feel quite weak. It was as if she was rooted to the spot, waiting for someone to appear in the lit-up doorway behind her... What did it all mean, what had got into her today?

She seemed to remember him coming out, the noise of his footsteps dying down, the bucket clattering on the front steps; she seemed to remember him expressing surprise at the night and coming up to her; at which point they were at a loss for words and then, she seemed to remember, she asked him where he'd come from and how long he was going to stay, and he mentioned Moscow and some date or other and seeing his massive head half-lit up in the light of the doorway, she again rejoiced at what a fine lad he was, not a bit stuck up, not a bit like the actors on postcards; and she seemed to remember him giving her water to drink in the bucket, supporting her head on the palm of his hand and that she had quivered at his touch, choking and secretly expecting something.

On the other hand she remembered vividly how, having drunk her fill, pressing back against the stanchion and lowering her eyes, she'd opened her cold lips to his, thinking as she did so, "And Lyoshka?"

## II

Lyoshka spent that night in the fields.

He arrived the next morning to stock up with spare parts for the mower, sign on at the recruiting office, as well, of course, as to see his Lipa.

At midday he knocked at her door and as no one answered he walked straight in. She was in bed.

"Were you on duty?" he asked, taken aback.

"Yes," she said, turning away. "What have you shaved your head for then?"

"For fun."

"Stupid. Your head's too big as it is."

Lyoshka had had a drink or two and was in a good mood. He walked backwards and forwards from the bed to the table, thumbed through the papers and then, sitting on the edge of the bed, began to get fresh.

"So that's how it is. The husband arrives home and the wife's got her feet up, dead to the world?"

"When you're tipsy, Lyoshka, you don't half talk a load of rubbish."

"Isn't it like that then?"

"Don't know, don't want to know," she said in a flat voice.

He got up and began pacing the room again.

"I hear the actors put on a show at the club?"

"Yes."

"What did they get up to there? Show off their biceps?"

"They told us how they act roles, how they never get enough sleep."

"Drink, is that it?"

"Leave off! Always have to have your joke, don't you?"

"Get up and we'll go for a walk, I'll have to be going soon."

In the evening she went part of the way with him. They rode Lyoshka's motorbike. Holding on to Lyoshka with both arms Lipa shouted mischievously into his ear:

"Stupid Lyoshka, why did you shave your head?"

"Ha!" he grinned. "You don't care, do you?"

"Course, I do. You look a right freak. Next time you shave your head, you'd best keep away."

"Right, I'll remember that."

Shadows lay along the belts of woodland. A mower could be heard throbbing in the distance.

"Where were you last night then?" Lyoshka asked.

"Where was I?" Lipa repeated the question, wondering whether to

tell him or not. "Better not ask," she replied and started to think about the previous evening.

She'd soon come to her senses last night, sobered up and made off, refusing to be seen home. Fancy, she had thought, mulling things over in the morning and feeling somewhat uncomfortable. There's no telling what will happen in life, who'd ever have guessed... If I told my friends, they wouldn't believe me: "What?" they'd say. "That's not like you." And who did he take me for? He probably still thinks I'm an easy lay, I'm not a bit to blame though, it just somehow happened. No, that's a lie, of course, I'm to blame. I didn't half feel ashamed opening my eyes in the morning and remembering the night before, knowing that poor Lyoshka had slept there at the camp and had no idea. She'd been loth to go to the shop even: it had seemed to her everyone must know she'd had it off with an actor. What if Lyoshka does the same? she suddenly thought with a pang of jealousy. Gets tired of waiting for me, picks up some girl or other, Nyurka, for instance, and takes her off from the camp with him. Oh, what did I do it for!

"Lyosha!" she said, clasping him tight round the waist. "Do you miss me there?"

"Not during the day, we're working."

"Might have known." Offended, she released her grip. "No chance of that. That's men for you all over!"

"Miss you during the daytime, you must be joking!" Lyoshka shouted. "It's not so bad during the day. It's the nights sometimes that one begins to think: where's she vanished to, damn her, why doesn't she show up here?"

"Worried I've got a boyfriend, is that it?"

"You'd better not," Lyoshka said in a warning tone.

"What would you do if you were told I'd had it off with someone?"

"Me? Nothing. I'd sock you both in the jaw."

"Why him?"

"Because. What's got into you today?"

"Aren't jokes allowed then?"

They came to a stop beyond the haystacks. The team camp was still some way away. Tomorrow she was on the threshing-machine, or she wouldn't have got off the bike. She'd have gone on with him to the camp and stayed there for a day or two.

The sun had only just set. There was not a soul about, just stooks of hay, bushes, paths, silence. How good it is to have someone to see off, someone to take one out into the country, to run with into the

threshing-barn hoping one won't be seen and then the feeling of relief that there is no one in the whole wide world apart from the two of you. The summer would soon be over, everything would turn yellow, the fields seen from the window would look black in the rain, and there would be no one then to meet or see off.

Lyoshka was going to the camp for a whole week.

And after that it's into the army for him, Lipa thought with a stab of fear and she clutched him even tighter.

"What's up?"

"Wind's a bit chilly. What did they say to you at the recruiting office? When do you have to go?"

"Soon. Why?"

"Nothing," and she gave a sigh.

Her heart sank. What about me? she thought, close to tears. I'm just his girl, nothing more. I haven't so much as opened my mouth and he's nowhere near guessing. He'll go off and I'll be stuck here, left to my own devices. He won't be back for ages. That's not the worst of it, though, I could put up with that, but what happens if he goes to pot there, if some shrew gets her hands on him, what will I do then?

"Let's get married," Lyoshka said, having got there at last.

"Let's!" Nodding her agreement Lipa clung to him gratefully, kissing his face.

"You got the wind up, didn't you? Go on, tell me what were you thinking?"

"Can't remember," she hedged.

"They're all the same, that's what you were thinking, isn't it?"

"No, not that."

His lips were rough and warm and the last thing she wanted was to leave him and wander off back across the fields in the dark. Though he realised this, he said:

"You aren't afraid alone, are you?"

"I'm no baby. You can't wait to see the last of me, can you?"

"Once a woman, always a woman! You stop that!"

"Alright."

She was ready to do anything, say anything to him now! How she would have loved him at home, and in the morning taking pity on him she'd have let him lie in. She'd have loved him even more, if that were possible, than she did at this very minute, and goodness knows she loved him enough now and was already sick at heart at the thought of having to part from him for a whole week! And she



pressed up against him, her heart feeling faint and beating hard against his breast.

"You going now?" he asked, embracing her.

"Let's wait a bit."

"Come on Saturday."

"Alright."

"Only no more of your jealousy, mind."

"It's gone."

"You'd better be going, it's getting dark."

"Don't worry, I always make it," she said and, falling further and further behind, she walked after him. Wheeling the motorbike over the bridge, Lyoshka pushed it up the hill, started it and rode off.

He'll be off for good soon, she thought as she turned back. And still thinking she walked along without any fear.

### III

She'd go fairly often to visit the team.

Come Saturday, she'd put on a clean dress, pencil in her unplucked eyebrows and set off after lunch. Walking along, taking her time, she'd arrive just as dusk was falling. The camp would already be astir: tractor drivers sluiced themselves down by the waterbutts, the cooks sliced up bread and then they would sit at length over the evening meal smoking and chatting. Boys would pair up with girls disappearing to their rooms in makeshift summer accommodation with trestle beds and hay chaff on the floor; and some would go off to the next-door farm to the cinema returning in time for the morning milking when farm girls and women squatted deftly by their cows, and the nightbirds would explore the saucepans, creak the doors and lie back for a quick nap on their beds. From the yard the slapping of women's hands and shouting could be heard: "Manka, Zorka, Ryabka, ge-t over with you, ge-t over!"

Come Saturday and from the early morning onwards she'd be unable to settle to anything. Now she was taking Lyoshka cigarettes and a clean shirt and preparing in advance for argument knowing how he disliked it when unbeknown to him she carried off his dirty washing, laying it out afterwards in a neat bundle on his pillow.

By the farm she came across some women, walking home after work and picking over the latest news. They mentioned among other

things the visiting horde of actors who, evidently, had nothing better to do than knock about the world, taking curtain calls and, what is more, dallying around. And that subject having cropped up, gossip was inevitable and it all came out: who'd had it off with whom and when and wasn't it disgraceful...

Beyond the hayricks Lipa caught sight of people, cars, unhurried turmoil.

The sun still lingered over the coppice, long shadows lay like mown grass over the dry earth, and the delicate, gossamer landscape shimmered in the distance.

Lipa stopped and stood some way off. The shooting appeared to be almost over. Stripped to the waist, a man in a beret sat on a dolly by a camera; a boy in colourful, embroidered trousers was pushing the dolly backwards and forwards. The women had taken off their dark glasses and were nibbling sandwiches and drinking something from thermos-flasks. Lipa was at a loss to know what was going on between the camp tables, arc lights and packing cases. Now she heard shouts of "Let's do it again!" whereupon one of the actors took the lady cook in his arms, now there would be a sudden pause in the filming and the actors would stand to one side while the man who'd given the order, frowning and looking important, paced from the tables to the clearing, everyone avoiding him. A pleasant-looking young lad lay by some bushes humming in a low voice to the strains of a guitar: "Playing gooseberry is not for me!"

The clothes and mannerisms of the Moscow women put Lipa's nose out of joint and she stared hard at one of the actresses whom she had once seen in the village shop buying expensive sweets, sizing her up with female shrewdness. All of a sudden she felt quite glum, she was such a nonentity by comparison, so obviously a country wench, she liked everything about the Moscow women so much and disliked everything about herself that she even felt ashamed remembering how she had dressed herself up that morning admiring herself in front of the mirror. She envied them their interesting life, they didn't half know a lot, as for what they talked about... At this point she tried to picture to herself what their husbands might be like and the whole of their life in posh, quick-witted Moscow.

"Let's call it a day!" the man barked. "Dusk has set in."

Everyone ran to the bus, the workmen began gathering up the equipment. The women from the next-door farm were also making tracks for home. One of the girls was describing the second part of

a film she'd seen when she had taken some tomatoes into town to sell at the market.

"So he ends up with the dark-haired lass and the husband of the dark-haired lass stays put with the lass with the fat face. Given half a chance I'd see it again, it was a real heart-throb!"

It was already quite dark when she noticed Oleg by the stream. Tall and handsome, towel over shoulder, he was climbing up the bank. They greeted each other. Lipa blushed and both, it seemed, immediately remembered the night on the front steps. In some confusion she said she was on her way to the field camp and in a hurry.

"Don't wait!" he shouted to the driver of the bus. "I'm going for a stroll."

They stood by the stream for what seemed to be ages, it was getting on.

"I'll be going then," she said. "It's pitch dark and all."

"I'll come with you."

"Better not, eh?" she cautioned and both immediately understood.

Oleg didn't answer. Crossing the stream in silence, they started across the field. It was already difficult to see more than a few steps ahead. Supporting her by the hand, he spun her round to face him, clasping her tight round the shoulders.

Not again, she thought, overcome by agitation.

"No, no, no!" she said, trying to stop him. "You mustn't."

He covered her lips with his, at first she cried out pushing him off with her hands, but she didn't keep this up for long and, weakening, allowed herself to be drawn closer.

And she began to feel as if she was back on the front steps, again her head was in a whirl, and he was at her side, and though neither uttered a word, they were both thinking about the front steps and it was all happening over again, only worse this time, and she had to get a grip on herself and push him off.

A white wing of lightning flashed overhead, raindrops pattered underfoot. There was a sudden, strong smell of dust.

"Rain," he said in a whisper, moving his face away. "What are we going to do? You're not afraid of me, are you?"

No, she wanted to say. Oh, what am I doing!.. What am I doing!..

Night had descended and the rain was coming down harder and harder, there was not a soul in the field apart from the two of them, there were some haystacks over the road, they could shelter there, but no, better not, he was smiling, it was all so simple for him, as if it could be no other way.

Ah! There she was giving in again, it was distressing, and sweet, and shaming.

He took her by the hand, pulling her, pulling her, his head bent down towards her, kind, handsome, good, and again there was no one about, not a soul, and no one would ever know about the two of them. But no, she wasn't going to succumb to a moment of weakness, she wasn't going to be unfaithful to her Lyoshka. "No, no," she whispered and tearing herself away from him she ran off without looking back.

Coming down faster still, soft, steady sheets of rain fell on all sides, lightning flashed overhead and for a split second she was lit up as she ran full tilt, loosing her balance, vanishing, then flashing back into view, the rain pouring down in her wake.

He stood motionless, watching her.

The country, the rain, Oleg thought. And that simple village girl, I'm with her one minute and she's gone the next, and here I am standing like a little boy in the middle of the road. Getting wet... To hell with fame and the good life, all one needs is to experience a feeling like this, at dead of night, in the middle of the road. She's run off to her bloke. And I'm not going after her. I bless her, even. It's raining, and she's running to him. The rain, the dark, moments like this are rare...

And he turned round and walked home, oblivious to his surroundings, while Lipa ran on and on to her Lyoshka at the field camp, crying with happiness because someone loved her, crying because she too was in love, she couldn't wait to reach the camp, to burst into his room and come to a standstill before him.

Seeing a wet and scared Lipa, Lyoshka flung himself towards her thinking she'd had a mishap.

"What's wrong? What happened?"

Taking her outside under the awning, he asked her again:

"What's up?"

"Nothing."

Nestling up to him she burst into tears.

"Did someone frighten you? Offend you?"

"No-oo."

"Aren't you going to tell me, then?"

"Kiss me... Quick, quick, Lyoshka..." she whispered, as they kissed. "Don't leave me on my own any more, I've had enough."

"Once a woman, always a woman, that's what I say," and Lyoshka began to laugh.

## IV

A week before the shooting was due to end, Oleg's theatre summoned him by telegram to a Volgaside town. Their tour was almost over and Oleg had to play in three productions. The shooting came to a halt. He didn't particularly want to go: they weren't lead roles and it would have been easy to get a substitute. He decided though to honour his obligations. He hadn't been with the company long, wasn't given lead parts as yet, and was more or less free to film when he wanted to. And Oleg was considering giving up the stage and transferring to a film actors' studio.

The cinema was gradually making him known, he'd worked with interesting film groups and this summer he'd been particularly lucky. He was liked wherever he went, he was continually striking up friendships with dressers, lights and make-up men, his independent approach to his work was immediately appreciated and, more important, his sincerity both in real life and in his acting was much valued.

He had chummed up with the young director. In May, on their way to the country, the director had invited Oleg into his compartment and had suddenly begun talking to him about the torments he was going through, and about how he wanted this to be the film of his life.

"Oleg, old chap," the director had said, embracing him, "nothing is going to stop me! I've got to do it! You were right: Julia hasn't a feel for what is really important. And without a heroine there is no film."

Oleg too had become fond of this gentle man, who was so tough on himself, he liked his style of directing — he would work slowly, careful to retain intact his ideas about life and expressing them in each shot. Though Julia, the subject of his complaints, was both pretty and talented, she was as dumb as they come and couldn't begin to follow the director's train of thought. She was fine so long as she remained silent. But in difficult episodes or even talking to fans she failed desperately. Fair-haired, assuming rather an arrogant pose before her audience, at the last get-together with the locals she had literally put the film team to shame. "Meeting fans is always a very nerve-racking experience for us." Listening to her the director had covered his face with his hands. "It's a great happiness and a great responsibility. We have just finished shooting some difficult scenes and we are utterly exhausted. We really like it here, your countryside is so beautiful, the people so delightful, we hate the thought of leaving...

To give you an idea of what filming is all about, let me describe to you today's shooting. I had to get on a horse..."

It had been excruciatingly embarrassing.

Yes, Oleg had thought ruefully, sitting beside her. Yes, he thought in the plane carrying him to the old town on the Volga, the locals have put us on a pedestal and we already see ourselves as gods. We throw our weight around, behave as if we come from a different world. It was really interesting stuff that, how she fell off the horse, then got back on it again and kept on missing the stirrup! We are bastards, he muttered to himself, his thoughts kept returning to the previous evening and he even gave his fellow-actors a rather lukewarm greeting, avoiding the kissing that is traditional when actors meet.

The last performances were underway. After the curtain came down, he would take a tram ride to the outskirts of the town where he'd bathe in the Volga at dead of night, gazing in the silence at the small, crooked houses huddled together on the river bank and at the remote forest clearings on the far shore. It's about time I went to see Dad, he thought walking back to the hotel and remembering the Urals, his father's artistic fame and the family love for Bazhov's fairy-tales. He'd long been dreaming of getting away from it all for a month or two, of living by fields and rivers, of reading at long last his favourite books instead of film scripts and plays, of going to ground and sending off letters to his friends from his hideaway, but his dreams never came to anything due to an endless chain of tempting offers from film directors. He'd been hard at it ever since he graduated from drama college.

On the day of his departure, he gave an inspired performance. During the intervals, he smoked, played chess and made inquiries about the AN-10 night flight. At half past ten having taken off his make-up and changed, he bid goodbye to the scene shifters and walked through the stage door.

Ah-h, he said to himself, remembering the note he had received after the first act, trust me to forget.

An attractive-looking girl stood under the poplar-tree. From the way she let drop her bag and turned away in confusion, he realized it must be her.

"It was you, wasn't it?" he asked, coming up to her. "You wrote to me?"

He thought of her writing the note, wondering how to get it to him, of how in the intervals she would have gone up to the

large mirror in the foyer to check once again that she looked alright, that she'd make a good impression. And then of how she had waited for him here.

"No, a friend," she said.

"Where is she?"

"She's gone."

"What's your name?"

"Ira."

"Another Ira?"

"That's it."

"Perhaps you and your friend are the same person?"

"Perhaps."

What nonsense, he thought.

"Well, let's be going," he said, not knowing what to do with her. It sometimes happened he struck up chance acquaintances with women and no sooner had they got to know him, got used to him than they would begin to adapt themselves to his taste, to like — were they being genuine or, perhaps, pretending? — what he liked, to sense his mood, to dream, get discouraged and then to want something more.

"I'm on my way to the airport," Oleg said.

She walked ahead of him, swinging one leg slowly past the other, as if to show herself off, wanting to be desired. They went as far as the bus in silence.

Unlike many of his colleagues, he was not in the habit of making use of his position as a film actor to forward love affairs. If, on meeting someone, he was not recognized he'd say he was a teacher or an engineer to test out what he was worth in his own right. The girl was from Moscow. He didn't say anything, it was time to say goodbye, to think of a way of leaving her without offending her, because it could well be she wasn't the sort of girl who gave her telephone number easily.

"Well," she said, taking the bull by the horns, "after all that time, it seems we've nothing to say to each other."

Her joke came off. It was time to shake hands. He didn't ask for her address in Moscow, didn't promise anything, and understanding, she tensed up, somewhat at a loss. It was obvious she was a shy, impressionable kid.

"All the best," said Oleg.

An hour later he was sitting in his seat in the plane.

Bidding goodbye to the outskirts of the town through the window,

he thought again of the girl, then he began to think about his own life, of his plans for the future and little by little he began to dream of someone who didn't yet exist, though she could well have been, and of how she would call him to Moscow, and embrace him on the station, in the underground and at home in their flat.

From the airport he rode to the village in an empty bus which had been sent to pick up the consignment of new recruits.

Four other buses were parked in the village square; here and there people had gathered together, an accordion was playing and girls were sobbing.

The village streets were astir, as on Sundays or a holiday. The pair of them could easily be made out among the dressed-up villagers, drunks and general hubbub of voices, wailing and concertina-playing: he looked quite unconcerned and calm, she, having danced and talked to him in a corner to her heart's content, was standing alone lost in thought, keeping a light grip on herself, though an incautious word or the sight of the bus would immediately set her off again.

Past the village shop he ran into Sharonikha.

"Hey, son-in-law!" she cried out in delight standing across his path, red as a beetroot, her face smeared with soot and wearing a soldier's jacket. "And we were only just talking about you. 'Where's our son-in-law got to?' we were asking." And seizing him by the arm she pulled him through the gate of the cottage next door. "We've drunk to your lady love and all, you've missed the bus, you have. She's gone and got married. We've been on the razzle for four days now, the neighbours are milking the cow for me."

"Which lady love?" Oleg asked.

"Eh-h, go on with you! Who was it you dallied with on the front steps then? I can see even in my sleep. Nothing happens in this village without my knowing it."

They went in, dancing was underway, brandishing a bottle of wine, a man was stamping his feet in the middle of a circle and singing ditties while tipsy village girls, swaying as if their lives depended on it, danced round him.

"Ooh!" there was a gasp from the circle as they saw Sharonikha with Oleg. "Look who's turned up!"

"Time for a new round!"

"Such an occasion warrants it, I'd say!"



Lyoshka and Lipa were sitting at the table. Embarrassed, she didn't greet Oleg.

"I've a bone to pick with you lot!" Sharonikha shouted. "Why am I the only person who's sober round here? I haven't even congratulated the young couple yet. Come on," she said leaning up against Oleg, "let's take a swig. We've got a secret toast and all."

"Lyoshka, Lyoshka," someone said having a dig at the groom. "While the cat's away... Here goes."

"Lipa!" said Sharonikha, winking at her slyly, "see who I've found. I always strike lucky, I do. No sooner do I go outside then up he comes. Cheers. Why aren't you clinking glasses, a pox on you both, you're no strangers..."

Lipa blushed and turned away.

"Auntie Marusya," she said, "you'll go too far one of these days..."

"Ha!" Sharonikha choked. "I used to be far worse. Laid them all flat, I did. Come on with you now, clink glasses."

"Why not?" Lyoshka said, not having understood a thing. "We don't know each other, do we? Alexeil!" and he held out his hand to Oleg. His head shaved, wearing the grey shirt he was going to travel in, Lyoshka was tipsy and in fine fettle. "Meet the wife," he said, clasping Lipa to him.

"They are old filming pals," Sharonikha blurted out. "He's my son-in-law."

"Mother-in-law!" Oleg shouted. "You bolt up now."

"What have I gone and done then? Nothing. I'm all for obliging everyone, I am."

Lyoshka embraced Lipa, Sharonikha went on talking at nine to the dozen, a song was struck up, and the words of the young couple, who were leaning tenderly towards each other, came slipping through the general hubbub:

"Well?"

"Fine!"

"Bought you some envelopes."

"We get those free, army supply."

"Drop us a line from the first station, then."

"The first station's a bit soon."

"Don't, they can all see."

"Let them."

Scrambling up from the table, they go into the inner room,

pulling the curtain to. Whispering can be heard from behind it.

An old man pours out a second glass for Oleg and starts questioning him about his life.

"I saw you... Forgotten what the film was called. You were in love with a doctor, and standing by a barn... Well done, you can act, alright."

"Lyoshka," came a whisper from behind the curtain.

"Hm?.."

"Perhaps I should go to evening school? The time would pass quicker."

"What? You chatter away without any rhyme or reason, you do."

"I'm asking your advice."

"Take care. And if it looks likely, don't lift anything heavy."

"What if it is?"

"Oh to be seventeen, with bell-like breasts!" Sharonikha was shouting.

"What about another round, Dad?" Oleg asked.

"Time for that long ago."

Getting tipsy, and recalling his two meetings with Lipa, Oleg felt a bit sad. Then he sat listening, quietly giving up thanks to life for everything: for his riotous youth which had left him plenty of friends, for his days at drama college, for his first successes, for the affectionate understanding of women, for the feeling he had that he was needed by young and old alike, and for the fact that in this, as in other villages, he was accepted as one of them. And he was grateful too he hadn't been spoilt by an environment where this can happen only too easily. Chatting to the old man and gazing now and then at Lipa who was grieving at the thought of Lyoshka's departure, Oleg felt totally at peace with the world for at this particular moment he had everything he could possibly ask for.

"My congratulations, Lipa," he said, meeting her on the porch.

"Thank you."

"No, truly, I mean it, with all my heart."

"I'm sure you do, thank you."

He wouldn't kiss her now, even had she allowed him to; and if, after Lyoshka's departure, chance brought them together again on the dark front steps, he wouldn't behave as he had behaved before, for he valued a right way of life far more than he did a fleeting moment.

Back inside the room they were getting ready to dance again. Striking a chord, the accordion-player let out a roar, his fingers running swiftly over the keys.

Oleg didn't get the chance to say anything else and there was a lot he could have said, for his heart was brimming over with warm feelings for Lipa.

Swinging together, the dancers stamped away, arms outstretched. Sharonikha flashed past in her service jacket. "Here goes, oh mother mine, oh to be seventeen again!"

"Lipa, come and join us, come on, stop dithering!"

And she was off as light as thistle down, where had she learnt to dance like that! Lipa, Lipa, Lipa... Faster, faster, faster! Oh Lyoshka, we won't half show them, we'll go on dancing till the next time round, till the next time found, oh my, it won't half be a long wait though!"

"Come on, actor!"

"Shall I?"

"Oh, my true love, he's no fool, for..."

Ditties started up! Rather rude they are! But today it's allowed, today everything is allowed. No need to watch one's language in front of the youngsters, for the youngsters are youngsters no more. Off to the army they are. Time they got used to it!

The accordion-player broke out in sweat, they brought him a glass but he waved it away: he-had-no-time! Once more! Eh, here we go, and again! And again, forty times all at once! Better forty times at once than not once forty times!

"Once again, toes up, heels up, shouting, stamping oh my, just watch them go!"

The floorboards are giving way. Wait for it! "The devil take 'em!" — we'll put new ones in, if we live to see the day.

"You're my bossom pal, you are!"

Once more, once more, once more again!

Again, and again, and again and ... that's it! Phew!

One last round now — and it's time to go.

*Translated by Amanda Calvert*

"Yes."

"And where's Sonya now? And Nikita?"

"She's not very far from here in the forest, lying in her grave. I'm not sure of the exact place, I've never been there. She got on the wrong side of the Germans when they occupied our village. As far as I remember in a moment of fury she attacked a German corporal with an axe. They killed her on the edge of the forest when she was trying to escape to the partisans. They were too frightened to come up to her though. At night the partisans picked up her body and buried her. Nikita is still living in the village. He went off to his daughter in the Urals — she's a doctor — but came back, he pined for home too much."

"And where's Alyosha?"

Wrapping himself up in his blanket, the Captain didn't answer.

*Translated by Amanda Calvert*

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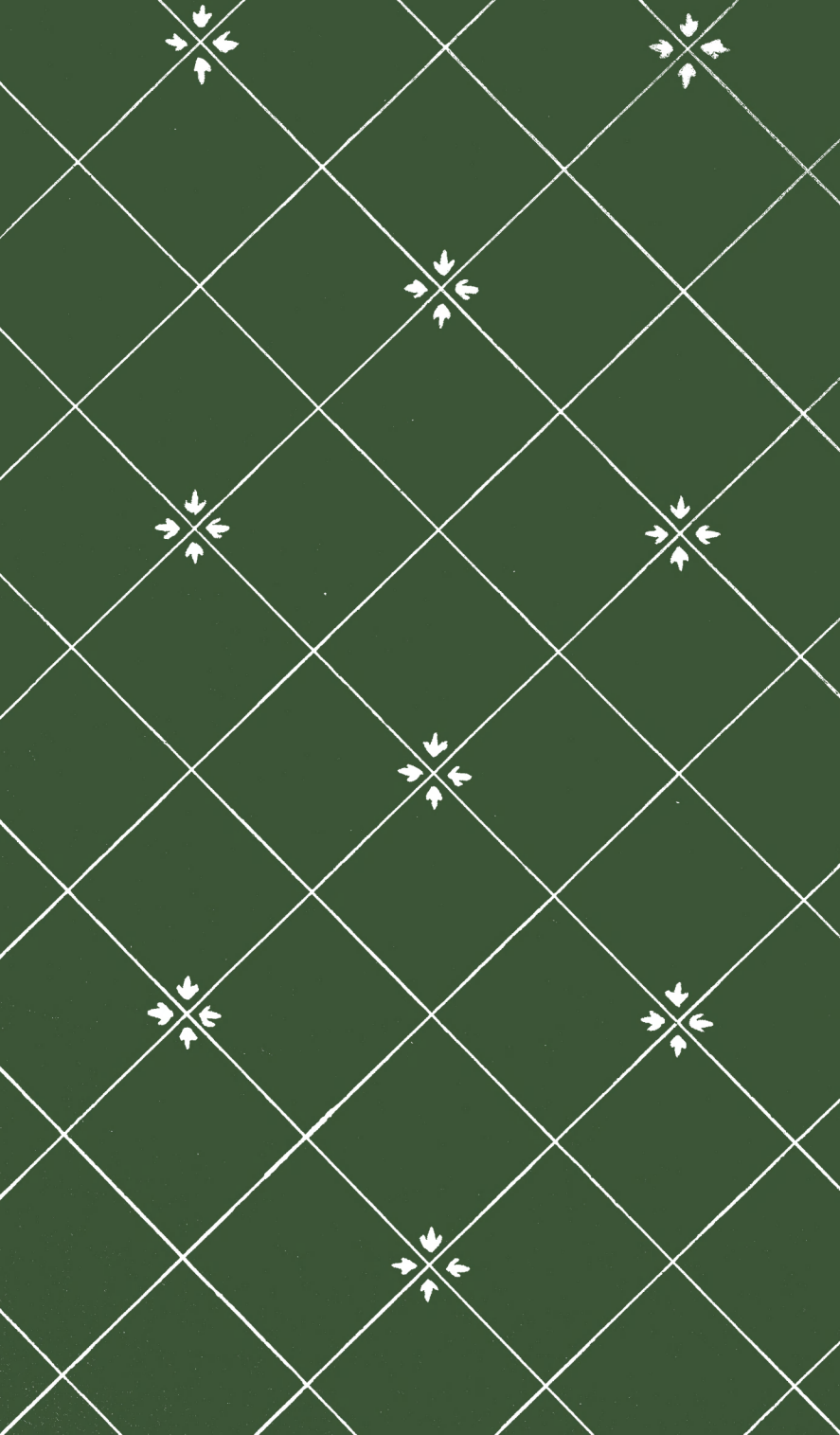
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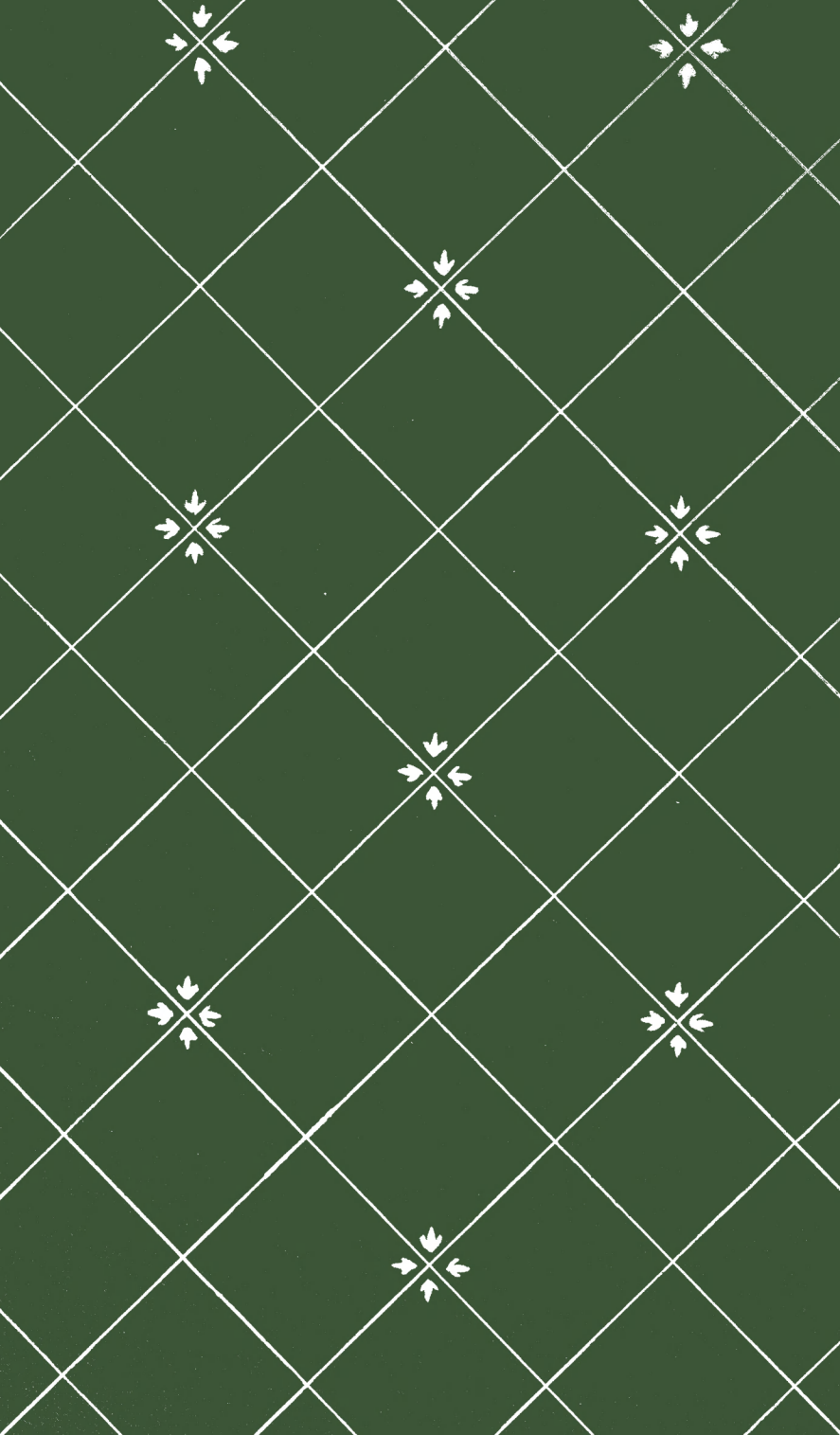
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